Chapter 8
Play and Early Childhood Education: The Construction of Childhood by the Children Themselves

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A Brief Contextualization of Early Childhood Education in Brazil

In Brazil, the environments in which children in preschool year spend most of their time are institutions of early childhood education. In such spaces, which are currently prepared for them, there are many opportunities for the development of young children, with special highlight to playing.

Following the concept of child expressed in the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education—DCNEI, acronym in Portuguese (Brasil, 2010)—which establishes early childhood education as the first step of elementary education, offered in kindergartens and preschools, and encompasses children between 0 and 5 years old, a child is understood as a "subject of history and rights that, through the daily experienced interactions, relationships and practices, builds his or her personal and collective identity, plays, imagines, fantasizes, desires, learns, observes, tries, narrates, questions and builds senses on nature and society, producing culture" (Brasil/DCNEI, 2010, p. 12).

Thinking of children as active and competent historical subjects, considering their concreteness that is forged in the conditions of existence, makes us amplify our vision of childhood by perceiving them in their own development through different historical moments in the most diverse cultures, recognizing their permanence and continuity as a social and structural category of changing quality that is conditioned to the characteristics of distinct periods (Qvortrup, 2010a).Thus, one can say that childhood, as a category, is a social space through which we all move and that is built by different childhoods (Qvortrup, 2010a).

The multiple childhoods tell us about striking differences in the living conditions that generate social inequalities. Here we highlight the conception and promotion of

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public policies directed to the Brazilian early childhood education, from the supporting and/or philanthropic initiatives without pedagogic purposes since the Colonial and Imperial Brazil, passing through the changes that happened by the implementation of the Republic, when the first preschools appeared, to the 1970s, when the military dictatorship implemented, following the USA model, the policy of compensatory education for children between 4 and 6 years, based on the theory of cultural deprivation that advocated the cultural and economic need of children from the grassroots classes. The offered education was characterized by the lack of theoretical background and lack of commitment with educational quality (Santana & Cassimiro, 2015). In the 1990s, the Education Law (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional; Lei n° 9.394/96—LDBEN) was approved, and the Forums of Early Childhood Education in Brazil were created, leading to the organization of the Interforum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil (Movimento Interfóruns de Educação Infantil do Brasil—MIEIB), a leading actor until the current days.

As explained by Arelaro and Maudonnet (2017), the Forums were spaces of social mobilization, discussion, active fight on behalf of 0- to 6-year-old children to have access to quality education, proposition, and monitoring of public policies in the area. It is worth highlighting the influence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the Brazilian educational guidelines and policies, such as in the municipalization of the early childhood education. This scenario, in face of the precarious financial situation of most municipalities, plus the incidents of corruption and misuse of public funds have caused serious difficulties in the implementation of what is advocated in the legal documentation, such as the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the National Education Plan (Plano Nacional de Educação—PNE). One example is the incapacity to meet the demand for admissions, which generates a historical deficit that explains the educational neglect and abandonment generated by several governments (Ferreira, Mendes, & Costa, 2015).

In 2005, under a new political project that moved away from the orientations of the World Bank, the Ministry of Education defined the priorities including all levels and modalities of basic education, i.e., childhood education, adult education, and high school. In 2006, the federal government launched the Basic Infrastructure Parameters for Institutions of Early Childhood Education, which focused on the specifications of the physical structure of kindergartens and preschools. In 2007, the National Program for the Restructuring and Equipment of the Public School System of Early Childhood Education, known as Proinfância (Brasil, 2007), was implemented, which aimed to fund the construction and restoration of kindergartens and units of early childhood education, as well as to acquire the adequate accommodations for such institutions (Santana & Cassimiro, 2015).

From the second semester of 2016 on, a setback was established in the social policies. Regarding early childhood education, during the current government, "informal" low-cost programs that take the responsibility for the care and education of children away from the State are being implemented. One example is the "Happy Child" Program created by the Ministry of Social and Agricultural Development,

which focuses on the familiar education of babies and small children, without perspectives of investing in the expansion and qualification of kindergartens and preschools (Arelaro & Maudonnet, 2017). This being only one example, we state that such an action is not an isolated case. Similar proposals are multiplying and reaching all levels of education, including the renovation of high school and the restriction of public and free higher education, which is translated into the reduction of scholarship and a limited access to activities of research and teacher formation. The same logic, or same political project, reaches other areas, such as health, culture, and, of course, economy.

The current context indicates a threat to the historical achievements in early childhood education, with the possibility of a return to practices and programs that show little dialogue with research, experts, and social movements, demanding that instances such as the MIEIB, among others, redefine forms of collective action and confront (Arelaro & Maudonnet, 2017).

In this brief retrospective, it is clear that currently the childhood education in Brazil is facing many challenges, from the inadequacy of physical spaces and the lack of specific formation of teachers and managing teams, which difficult the organization, in kindergartens and preschools, of spaces and routines (Santana & Cassimiro, 2015), to the experience of antagonistic social processes with which we have been living since the country's redemocratization process, whose reflex in the childhood education appears in the form of conflicting policies directed to this area. The proximity with the school context through research activities is a promising and hopeful path because it leads to a partnership with the educator and an exchange of experience and knowledge, thus creating the possibility of sustaining the conception of child described in the DCNEI as explained above.

Play in Early Childhood Education

In school, children do not only interact with their classmates but also with adults (educators) and the physical environment, which inform them about the disciplinary rules that must be followed, thus playing an active role in the children's formation. In this regard, the spaces that are reserved to them in the educational environment arise as places where playing is related to opportunities to learn under the supervision of qualified adults. The school generally provides play areas (playgrounds, toy library, among others) in which, during short periods previously scheduled in the school calendar, the children may enjoy moments of spontaneous play, although with some restriction, as it happens with the rough-and-tumble play, usually forbidden. This kind of play is more frequent among boys and includes behaviors of fight, pursuit, and flight without the intention of hurting. Children play about fighting, and the constant laugh among the participants makes it clear. But there are other kinds of play (Moraes & Otta, 2003): those that involve intense sensory motor movement, of great range, such as running and jumping, in which the child exercises spatial relations and understands the strength and function of

several handled objects—they are often seen in playgrounds, for example. There are also symbolic or imaginative plays, also known as make-believe, in which the child develops plots, invents, and assumes characters, experiencing the "as if"—playing house. Example is also the construction games, such as Lego, and games with rules, such as soccer, in which the children follow a ritualization of roles and representation of predetermined scenes. Among those games, it can be highlighted some traditional ones, such as hopscotch, kite, marbles, and others that, as a heritage from ancient traditions, are rich in meaning and carrying the mark of popular culture, entered the school with restrictions. Many of them "suffered a process of pedagogical asepsis and their cultural contents were removed and many times replaced by others with a prominently 'pedagogical' character" (Vasconcellos, 2008, p.50). Without disregarding the pedagogical use of play resources, here we problematize the schooling tendency of early childhood education and its repercussions on the children's play in school.

Going back to the history of early childhood education in Brazil, one can notice that, while previously there was an attempt to surpass the custodial and philanthropic assistance of the service, the adopted school model is still discussed nowadays as if it were the only and best model by considering early childhood education as a preparatory stage to the school years ahead and highlights the role of the teacher in the process of teaching and learning, without a similar appreciation for the active and creative role of the learning (as well as teaching) child (Lordelo & Carvalho, 2003). It is in the flow of this schooling tendency that the play becomes a hostage of curricular activities, without taking into consideration that it, by itself, has its own senses and meanings, i.e., is self-motivated. Thus, it is noticeable, among the professionals that act in early childhood education, the presence of difficulties and ambivalences regarding play activities, even though it occupies a prominent place in early childhood education for both teachers and children (Almeida & Sodré, 2015; Gomes, 2016; Lordelo & Carvalho, 2003; Marques & Sperb, 2013; Martins, Vieira, & Oliveira, 2006; Menezes & Bichara, 2015; Pedrosa & Carvalho, 2009). For example, there is, among the teachers, a consensus regarding the importance of watching the children play, even though this practice is not common. Indeed, playing can indicate the complexity of peer interactions (shared routines, communication, negotiation of interests, hierarchical relationships). One can also understand gender differentiations by identifying situations of segregation (when some formed groups are uniquely composed of boys or girls), stereotypes (when the children's behavior follows certain social patterns that identify them as either boys or girls), and typification (when the choice of toys or other objects follows social patterns that consider them typical of (and adequate to) either boys or girls). It is also worth noticing that, by playing together, children develop the peer culture that contrasts with the adult culture in the school represented by the educators. They create several strategies of conversation and negotiation of interests by means of collective playful projects that guide the occupation of available spaces to play at school, violating rules in many situations.

To watch the children play is, therefore, to see them in the full development process, which is the object of study of many different knowledge fields that con-

tributed and still contribute to discussions on the notions of childhood throughout history and on what one must expect from children during their experiences in this part of their lives.

Developmental Psychology and Childhood Sociology

Within these abovementioned areas, due to the proximity of their objects of study, developmental psychology and childhood sociology gain prominence. The first is interested in the ontogenetic processes and, therefore, in everything that is related to the child and the experiences it carries out throughout its life cycle, while the second tries to understand the aspects that are shared in a social context by groups of children throughout historical times and cultures. But would it not be a constraint to think of these sciences in such a limited way?

Developmental psychology certainly recognizes the relevance of the social context, especially if it is healthy, so that the child has the minimal developmental opportunities, including not only the physical and cognitive aspects but also the social and affective-emotional ones. What defines it as a behavioral science is the direction of its look that goes from the individual to the society, although it recognizes the extreme relevance of social interactions for such construction (Qvortrup, 2010a). Similarly, childhood sociology recognizes that the individual characteristics of the child considerably affect the understanding of its social interactions. However, there is a way that better translates the practical approximation that exists between these conceptions, and this is to see them as psychosociological studies (Mauss, 2010). Thus, although their particularities must be respected, regarding the child/childhood relations, both sciences are essentially complementary.

As stated by Sarmento (2004), children always existed as biological representatives of human youth. On the other hand, the conception of childhood as known today, especially the one that understands it as a plural social category, arose through the countless representations of children that were built during the evolution of societies. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the necessary relationships between the notions of child and childhood while at the same time understanding more clearly the origins that distinguish them. According to Qvortrup (2010a), in the course of history, there was a disregard for both categories, including from psychology and sociology, this being the reason for the little consideration with children research.

Despite these recent changes in our way to perceive children within their developmental contexts, the tradition visions of a protected childhood that prepares to the future still prevail, reinforcing the idea of incompleteness and negation in relation to adults (Qvortrup, 2010b; Sarmento, 2007). These conceptions are so prevailing in the history of societies that institutions for children as kindergartens and the first daycare facilities were created to offer care when the mothers started to enter the labor market (Qvortrup, 2010b). Recognizing the strength of history in keeping the idea that children must be prepared for the future instead of fully living their childhood or being recognized as influent in the formation of societies, the

developmental psychology has been advancing in the understanding of childhood as a structural category (Qvortrup, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), avoiding projecting the abilities developed by the children to their adulthood.

By recognizing the importance of playing in the process of child development, one can notice that these activities allow children to explore the environment that surrounds them. They express appropriation and understanding of the culture of which they participate and are able to recognize their meaning, showing their active role in the contexts through which they transit (Cordazzo, Martins, Macarini, & Vieira, 2007).

It is noticeable that playing constitutes the prevailing activity of children in their daily routine, its occurrence being intimately related to the view about the plain, or not, experience of their childhood. Thus, it is a constant object of study in research on human development. As said before, in the educational context, playing seems to be predominant as a learning resource, reinforcing the idea of developing abilities for the future, even though development is an admittedly open process; hence, it is not determined by childhood events (Lordelo & Carvalho, 2003). Beyond the educational environments, plays may help in the development of social competence between peers (Colwell & Lindsey, 2005) as well as in the development of psychological processes that may assist learning in early childhood education (Oliveira, 2011).

Understanding how children play, as well as the main elements that compose this activity, becomes a key element when one intends to investigate childhood and to identify several aspects of children development. It is based on these new perspectives on childhood studies and the active expression of children, both regarding childhood cultures and the influence that they exert over the adult world, that we will present the report of two research studies with small children that essentially consider the expressiveness of themselves through their plays as they perceive them.

Research Reports: The Place of Children in Play Research

The research studies herein reported intended through studies on playing in early childhood education to rescue the active place of children as social actors through methods that praise their expressions.

The View of Children on Playing in Early Childhood Education

In this work (Gomes, 2013), the dialogue between developmental psychology and childhood sociology was the starting point for the choice of interviewing small children, considering that they are co-responsible for the process of cultural production, especially regarding such a proper resource as playing. Considering early childhood education as the space of the small child, this research attempted to identify the most highlighted contents brought by the children from two schools of early

childhood education, one public and one private, both located in the municipality of Salvador, Bahia, through their playing preferences within these microcontexts.

Seventeen children from both genders with ages between 4 and 6 years participated in the research through interviews. Due to their young age, we used the resource of drawing in order to maintain the dialogue and their interest in participating in the study, thus helping to have access to them (Elis, 2004). The interviews were conducted individually and initiated by the children receiving the instruction to draw what they liked to play the most in school. While the drawing was in progress, the researcher asked questions about the drawings as a starting point and also raised questions that could stimulate the children to speak about the plays and their elements in the context of early childhood education. All interviews were recorded in audio, the children participations were authorized by their parents and the school, and their identities were not disclosed, following the expected ethical procedures for conducting research with children.

Considering the lack of studies with children at this age that used interviews as a resource, the categories of analysis were created a posteriori, especially because the questions asked to the children during the conversation were elaborated from what each child spoke, without a previous structure that should be used with all of them. From the transcription of their talks, we conducted a superficial reading of the data where we identified the main ideas about the plays in school raised by the children. Based on this reading, we identified the subjects that originated the five categories elaborated for the presentation of the results of this research: favorite plays, favorite toys, play spaces, playmates, and play and school activity.

As stated by Marques and Bichara (2011), there is a relationship between how children play, including all its elements, and the context in which the play is developed, indicating that there are differences not only between the places where they occur but also between children. The specificities of each context have been presented as microcultures, which are smaller and proximal cultures through which we share elements that form our personal characteristics. For this reason, during data presentation, we attempted to identify whether there was any influence of educational microcontexts, both public and private, in the preferences reported by the children.

The play preferences presented by the children of the private school were so diverse that virtually each one chose one play, with only two children agreeing with the play "slide." Two of them indicated plays that consisted of make-believe: a boy that mentioned playing with a racing car, which it was actually a tricycle, and a girl that said she preferred to play Scooby-Doo, detailing the characters and their actions that are performed in this play. Contrary to the studies that presented the prevalence of make-believe in children (Cordazzo et al., 2007), here, initially, the preferences indicated more concrete plays.

However, from the eight children that attended the private school, only two did not mention any make-believe play in their interviews, indicating that this type of play is indeed prevailing in children of this age, and also makes us think how questions, and even categories, that are too strict do not work when dealing with the investigation of young children. Their thoughts are fluid and directed to the present moment of their talks (Gomes, 2013). Although there was a prevalence among boys

of make-believe with subjects more directed to their gender, most subjects can be considered neutral, such as playing McDonald's or Alvin and the Chipmunks, decreasing the relevance of this variable for the occurrence of plays.

The favorite plays of children from the public school also varied from child to child, without repetition of the initial choices between children. However, differently from the private school data, here the children mentioned more make-believe plays. By comparing the plays mentioned by both groups, soccer was present in both groups. A curious element that appeared in the talks of children from the public school was the frequent association between playing at home and playing at school, with moments in which it was not possible to understand where in fact the described plays took place. This was likely because for these children it did not make any difference, reinforcing the idea that what really matters is to play.

During their talks, the children constantly named their plays according to the name of the toys that they used, being noticeable the relevance of the toy and/or object for performing their playing activities, which indicates the central role that it has as a mediator of the play. Despite initially having indicated few toys as favorite, through the interview they added many objects that they used to develop their plays. Their talks indicated that the toy for this group of children is what formalizes the play within the school context, where directed activities usually prevail.

In the public school, the children indicated the slide as their favorite toy and showed a greater variety when mentioning what they used the most to play. For this group, there was a prevalence of choices according to gender, following traditionally expected social patterns, such as dolls and kitchen and stove with cooking pot for girls and Power Rangers, cowboy, and truck for boys, for example. On the other hand, although these choices indicate characteristics of the microcontext of the public school, denoting its direct influence over the children, the most mentioned toy is used in open spaces such as the playground and is not a determinant regarding gender.

Regarding toys and plays, we noticed the children would closely connect both, even showing a fluidity when referring to them, especially to the toys, since children from both schools rarely separated them. The plays were named after the toys, and the toys were named after characteristics of the plays and not the objects, as it is for tag and hide-and-seek. What stood out as different in both microcontexts was the availability of toys and spaces to play at the time of the research. In the private school, the children had a schedule to go to the playground and have access to the toys available. In contrast, the public school was being remodeled, and the playground was closed during most of the research time. This factor reflected over the talks of these children that indicated the teacher as the one who distributed the toys, as they ended up playing in the classroom, usually sitting in their chairs.

In school environments, spaces are usually well defined and have shared rules on how and when they should be used. The classroom space is for the development of planned activities that are usually directed to learning, while the playground is the space where the children may play with greater freedom and without obligations (Silva, 2007). The difference in the configuration of both ends up orienting the

opportunities of interaction between people and especially between the children during their plays.

Despite preferring the playground for playing, the children from the private school indicated that playing is what really matters. Regardless of the place, it seemed more important for them the availability of toys and the possibility of interaction than the space itself. Nevertheless, their talks corroborate the suggestion that the rules about the use of spaces in early childhood education are already clear, and the playground would be the "right" place to play. For children from the public school, the playground was also the favorite place for seven of the nine participating children. In this case, besides the rules about spaces to play that did not apply in practice, the playground was the place where they could relax and have free access to the toys and the classmates, being recognized even as a prize, since they did not make frequent use of it at that time.

The opportunities of interaction promoted by each place in the schools allow the children to evaluate the behaviors of their peers according to what they consider right or wrong, according to the rules that prevail in their educational contexts. This observation helps them to guide their behaviors while playing (Chen & Eisenberg, 2012). The social interactions that become established follow the same direction, being frequently strengthened by the current culture. Therefore, the preferences for playmates in the private school indicated prevalence in playing with children of the same gender. On the other hand, the group included more boys than girls, which indicates that we cannot be certain that the relation of gender in this context is related to affinities in playing or in the objects chosen for the play, despite this characteristic being mentioned.

In the public school, the number of boys and girls was more equally distributed, and the group was significantly larger. In this case, the preference for playing with partners of the same sex prevailed, especially among boys. We again suspect of the direct cultural force of this microcontext on the questions regarding gender, as well as on the opportunities of interaction in each school. The talk of the children suggested a marking of the adults on their actions, as they repeated expressions that they likely learned with them. One example was a girl who stated that "girls play with girls, boys play with boys," later complementing with "and mom does not like it," pointing to a rule that, from her view, seems unquestionable. The teachers were also mentioned by some children as playmates, but not with the same frequency.

In addition to the categories presented so far, we were able to identify one more that concerns the perception that the children have on the moments of fun, represented by the plays, and the moments of obligation, represented by the pedagogic activities. Regarding the existence of a certain time and place for each activity, most children from the private school indicated the break time or the "playground" time as the moment to play, although some stated that they play "all the time." That is to say, the space perceived by the children for this is the same that the school designed for them, which strengthens the understanding about the internalization of rules in the educational environment.

In the public school, due to the already mentioned specificities, the children related the time to play to the moment the teacher distributed the toys. Another highlighted aspect for this group of children was the lack of a specific time for the break or, whenever possible, to go to the playground, because it happened between the end of the activities and the beginning of the snack time; this time was about one third shorter than the time available for the children of the private school. However, for both groups of children, there was the understanding of established times to play and not to play, those being distinguished only by the indicators, which in one was going to the playground and in the other the distribution of toys by the teacher.

The Construction of "Children's Places" in the School Context

This study (Menezes, 2014), involved 20 5-year-old children groups enrolled in a public school of Salvador, Bahia, anchored on the construct proposed by Rasmussen (2004) and on the redefined concept of territory proposed by Carvalho and Pedrosa (2004). Rasmussen (2004) established two independent concepts: the *places for children* (concrete places, planned by adults for the plays, aiming for conditions of safety and adequate infrastructure, such as the playground and the toy library) and the *children's places* (informal places, created by the children from the affective investment that makes them special and that may have a concrete or only symbolic, abstract, existence). In the school context, the places for children and the children's places overlap, though not mixed. Thus, the construction of *children's places*, in school, results from the occupation, appropriation, and redefinition of *places for children*, leading to the emergence of unprecedented creations that are generally ephemeral, volatile, i.e., they appear and disappear following the social interactions that are engendered in the toy groups.

The redefinition of the concept of territory proposed by Carvalho and Pedrosa (2004), based on research with small children, exceeds the understanding of territory only as a physical, geographical, and political territory through the displacement of the functional relevance, which moves from resources security to the management of interpersonal relationships. Thus, playing with their peers, children demarcate places in which they establish transitory ownership/property, create coexistence rules, communication codes, and defense strategies, and define flexible frontiers. The research revealed a close dialogue between the concepts, as far as the *children's place* can be understood as a territory with a unique and original meaning, a territory that attributed flexible frontiers that give form and concreteness, even if momentarily, to its distinctive abstraction.

The used method was the observation of focus subjects and the cursive record during the break time in the playground and in the toy library, in moments of spontaneous plays, i.e., without the interference of adults. The observation sessions were organized into two stages. In stage 1, each child was observed in 5-min sessions each, at least twice in the playground and twice in the toy library. In stage 2, eight children were observed during the total break time (30 min), one time in the

playground and other time in the toy library. The objective was to understand how children build the *children's places*. The data were examined in two complementary dimensions: one descriptive, from the systematization of the data in tables and graphs in an attempt to identify the types of play, favorite subareas, and interaction modes, and other analytic, in which the content of all cursive records was used based on the analysis of episodes to illustrate an argument proposed by Pedrosa and Carvalho (2005).

The school, maintained through a partnership between the municipal government and a religious organization, operates in a large house projected to be a residence. Despite being well-maintained and conserved, the space is not ideal to hold all the children that remain there full time, from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., causing difficulties of internal transit, with the need to cross classrooms to reach the toy library, for example; or the shared used of the playground, the largest area of the school, installed in a balcony, which receives not only the plays but also parent conferences, lectures, and other activities; or yet the improvised installation of the toy library in a narrow corridor that also contains a place for food storage, a bathroom, and a locker for the staff.

Considering ethical questions, the research was free of informed consent from the participants and/or their guardians, based on the article 6 of the Resolution 016/2000 of CFP – Federal Council of Psychology, December 20, 2000, provided for situations that include naturalist observations in public environments and that preserve the identity of the participants. The research is part of a wider project entitled Urban Spaces for (and of) Plays: An Exploratory Study in the City of Salvador/BA, by Prof. Dr. Ilka Dias Bichara, approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in June 6, 2007. This study considered the spontaneous plays undertaken by the children as their genuine expression, able, therefore, to inform to the observer about the children's places, subjective constructions shared in the interactional dynamics of the playgroups.

Regarding the descriptive dimension, it was noticeable that, in the playground, boys occupied more central subareas, exhibiting more frequently motor activities, especially in the structure named, in the research, Equipment 1, a structure that included a slide, swings, and seesaws. Girls, on the other hand, preferred to occupy more peripheral subareas where they could organize, more peacefully, make-believe scenarios, the second most frequent play among them after motor activities. There was prevalence among both boys and girls to play in exclusive groups, revealing a strong gender segregation. According to the interaction mode, boys played in a more cooperative way and girls more solitarily. In the toy library, there was an almost absolute prevalence of symbolic play between boys and girls, which occurred, also predominantly, at four tables with chairs, installed by the wall at the end of the library toy, very close to the service area, the subarea containing the bathroom and the place for food storage, which contained sinks, as well as broken chairs and tables. Yet, it was the widest place of the toy library. The most frequent subjects of the make-believe play were, among boys, means of transportation, persecution/shooting mediated by toys, and other objects, as seen

in the playground, although here the fights were concentrated around the tables, without displacement of the children. Girls displayed subjects such as housekeeping, family/parties, and means of transportation. Girls presented a higher frequency of solitary interactions, while boys showed more cooperative interactions. Additionally, the children played about singing and dancing in the service area, these being considered variations of the motor activities as an adaptation to the restricted area of the toy library.

In the playground, the *children's places* emerged in several situations as momentary outbreaks. They revealed to be mutant, original and unpredictable. One example is the use of make-believe plays with a subject including fights, persecutions, and the like, featuring the most diverse toys as an alternative way that, in general, was successful to escape the control of the adult that forbid rough-and-tumble plays. Another example is the adaptation of a soccer game to the playground, where about 25 children were moving while simultaneously playing in several ways, including girls playing house. The game lasted the whole break time and also included one teacher (who played the role of referee), a situation that is very rarely observed, because the role of the adult prevailed as a regulator of the playing situations, being responsible, therefore, to authorize them or not, define the rules and even finish the play by considering it inappropriate or as a form of punishing inadequate behaviors. The construction of *children's places* in the playground made it a flexible and pleasant place; expressed gender relationships and differences regarding play categories, favorite subareas, and interaction mode; and highlighted a scenario of multiple and simultaneous plays.

In the toy library, the construction of *children's places* happened by means of two strategies: occupation and use of all the possible corners of the toy library, taking advantage of the place's attributes, such as frames and furniture (shelves, tables), favoring made-up plays; and exploration of the potentialities of symbolic plays and the available toys. One example of both strategies is a make-believe play experienced in a mixed group, in which the children create a car that carries mothers and their children to go for a stroll, which was built with the walls under the sink. During the play, the driver, the only participating boy, takes the girls and their dolls to several places of a city. It is interesting to think that the imaginary play expands the limited frontiers of the toy library, both in the use of the identified strategies and in the symbolism of the car that moves through space and reaches new scenarios/worlds.

The results indicated that, despite being built differently in the playground and in the toy library, the *children's places* worked as strategies to face the rules established by the school culture, represented by the adults (educators) that acted in the school, thus being a creative and inventive way elaborated by the toy groups to defend and negotiate their interests, including among themselves, create possibilities, and assure the possibility to play even in very adverse situations, such as limitations of time and space that demanded constant adaptations of the plays to the available conditions of the play area; restrictions imposed by the school rules, such as prohibition and punishment of rough-and-tumble plays; or the prohibition to use of certain equipment.

The research emphasized the inventiveness and complexity of the peer interactions stimulated by spontaneous plays, revealing the potentialities of the observation when it is planned and implemented based on clearly defined criteria. It also cataloged and discussed educational implications arising from the observed situations that demand a revision of the interpretation given by the pedagogical practice as generally exercised. It is worth to highlight, for example, the lack of perception of the richness of meaning of *children's places*, seen as messy places, the misunderstanding or ignorance of the importance and function of rough-and-tumble plays and their consequent association with aggressive and violent expressions, and the limitations imposed to the spontaneous play due to the curricular and normative demands.

Final Considerations

The reports herein presented indicate the new possibilities for the development of research with children and demonstrate how the children's point of view can be revealing regarding the activities that they develop in the context of early childhood education. Either through interviews or from observations of space use, we could see how much children interpret and create resources for their plays to happen according to their needs, by either adapting places, inventing spaces, or creating new rules, even though they recognize the rules of childhood education. Nevertheless, they are able to demonstrate that their ways to interpret these contexts are beyond the obvious, indicating their abilities to reinterpret and reinvent this place which they need to have to themselves and indicating that they understand these spaces and the activities that they develop in them as theirs. The plays are the expression of childhood, and nothing is better than searching in this resource the tool to access the world of the children that teach us much more than preferences but especially about how they create their own culture in an inventive and contextualized manner.

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