

CREATIVE RESOURCES MOBILIZED IN THE MAKE-BELIEVE OF CHILDREN
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

*RECURSOS CRIADORES MOBILIZADOS NO FAZ DE CONTA DE CRIANÇAS COM
DEFICIÊNCIA INTELECTUAL*

*RECURSOS CREATIVOS MOVILIZADOS EN EL IMAGINARIO DE NIÑOS CON
DISCAPACIDAD INTELECTUAL*



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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the play of children with intellectual disabilities based on the Historical Cultural Theory with the purpose of questioning: the representation of roles; the substitutive use of support objects; and the participation of bodily resources in play. Through microgenetic research, with analysis of an episode that occurred in a Brazilian public school, it was verified that the participants' play involved the assumption of characters and the symbolization of objects to compose fictitious scenarios. These data indicate that this audience has a complex imaginative functioning but marked by specificities that deserve investigation.

KEYWORDS: Imagination. Intellectual Disability. To play.

RESUMO: Este estudo investiga a brincadeira de crianças com deficiência intelectual, a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural, com objetivo de problematizar a representação dos papéis, o uso substitutivo dos objetos de apoio e a participação dos recursos corporais no brincar. Por meio da pesquisa microgenética, com análise de um episódio de faz de conta, ocorrido em uma escola pública brasileira, verificou-se que a brincadeira dos participantes envolveu assunção de personagens e simbolização dos objetos para composição de cenários fictícios. Esse dado aponta que esse público possui funcionamento imaginativo complexo, porém marcado por especificidades que merecem ser investigadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Imaginação. Deficiência Intelectual. Brincar.

RESUMEN: Este estudio investiga el juego de niños con deficiencia intelectual, a partir de la Teoría Histórico Cultural, con el propósito de cuestionar la representación de roles, el uso substitutivo de objetos de apoyo y la participación de recursos corporales en el juego. A través de una investigación microgenética, con análisis de un episodio, ocurrido en una escuela pública brasileña, se verificó que el juego de los participantes involucraba la asunción de personajes y la simbolización de objetos para componer escenarios ficticios. Estos datos señalan que este público tiene un funcionamiento imaginativo complejo, pero marcado por especificidades que merecen ser investigadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Imaginación. Discapacidad intelectual. Jugar.

Introduction

Throughout Lev Semionovitch's intellectual production Vygotski (1896-1934), imagination – constitutive of the complex psychological system – is discussed from different biases and conceptual perspectives, raising different questions. Would it be an activity, a function and/or a system? This more general questioning demonstrates the different facets that make up the theoretical spectrum, which runs through the work of the Belarusian author, on the aforementioned theme. At times, imagination is conceived as a specifically human activity – linked to the creative action of transforming nature (VYGOTSKI, 2009; VYGOTSKI, 2022). In others, imagination is a superior psychological function – linked to artistic and cathartic processes (VYGOTSKI, 1999) – and towards the end of Vygotski's work, imagination is responsible for crowning the complex psychological system (VYGOTSKI, 2012).

In the work *Pedagogical Psychology* (2010), for example, the author was interested in the aspects involving aesthetic education: the pedagogical instrumentalization of art, the limits between morality and art, as well as the aspects involving the aesthetic reaction (the passivity and activity in artistic contemplation), bringing important contributions to artistic creation in children's educational training. In *Psychology of Art* (1999), Vygotski problematized the specificity of the work of art, the aesthetic reaction and the impact of the cathartic experience on psychological functioning. His emphasis highlighted, among others, the intrinsic relationships between emotion and imagination involved, catalyzed and channeled in the creative process inherent to the work of art.

In 1930 (VYGOTSKI, 2022), Vygotski wrote a set of texts about imagination in human development, placing it at the center of questions involving what is specifically human. These ideas from Vygotski allowed contemporary authors to defend the ontological dimension of creation (PINO, 2005, 2006; PEDERIVA; TUNES, 2013; MAHEIRIE; ZANELLA, 2020, among others), positioning the theme of imagination and freedom at the center of the issues that concern Historical-Cultural Theory (SAWAIA; SILVA, 2015).

Another contribution was made in the scope of pedological studies (1931-1934). In the text “Imagination and creation of the adolescent” (VYGOTSKI, 2022), for example, the author highlights the centrality of imagination for the sense of freedom, by focusing on the development of people with compromised higher functioning. Here, Vygotski points out that imaginative activity is not characterized as a primary, autonomous and merely reactive function of the adolescent's psychic functioning. In the transitional age, imagination relies on complex concepts, acting independently of concrete aspects, as it works based on abstract thinking.

Vygotski (2012) categorically states that, in the transitional age, imagination crowns the superior psychological system, as highlighted previously.

Fantasy, therefore, is not the primary, independent and guiding function of the adolescent's psychic development, its development is a consequence of the concept formation function, a consequence that culminates and crowns all the complex processes of change that the adolescent undergoes in his mental life. (VYGOTSKI, 2012, p. 208-209, our translation).

Vygotsky 's work stands out for its optimistic outlook, unprecedented at the time, when analyzing the development of people with disabilities. The texts in which he directly exposes the theme were compiled, in 1983, in Volume V of Selected Works – Fundamentals of Defectology (1997, 2019). In relation to children who have some cognitive disability, studies on defectology by Vygotski (1997) highlight that the difference between those considered normal and those called “with disabilities” is not limited to quantitative aspects of intelligence, but refers to relationships between the environment, the organic structure and the formation of personality (DIAS; OLIVEIRA, 2013). For the author, it is essential to focus on the functioning of higher psychological functions, which must be understood in systemic terms and dependent on cultural dynamics.

The deepening of the idea of systemic functioning of higher psychological functions, linked to disability, is a problem that is at the heart of Historical-Cultural Theory, after all: “Pathology provides us with the key to understanding development and development, the key to understanding pathological conditions” (VYGOTSKI, 2012, p. 206, our translation). And, in the field of imaginative functioning – among the multiple activities that involve creation in ontogenesis –, playing seems to us to be a fertile field of investigation to give visibility to these intricate relationships.

For Vygotsky, the emergence of the imaginary situation at age is a central event for understanding child development. And it would be no different for children with disabilities. Following this argument, in this article we ask: what characterizes the play of children with intellectual disabilities? What imaginative resources do they mobilize in the composition of their games?

As a response to these questions, in this text we analytically explore the play of a child diagnosed with intellectual disability, through the microgenetic analysis of a scene from an episode of pretend play unfolding in the context of the playground of a public school on the outskirts of Brazil. Federal District (central-west of Brazil). Taking this case as a trigger, our objective is to problematize: 1) the assumption of social roles and voluntary attachment to the

principles that govern the behavior enacted; 2) the creative and substitutive use of support objects during the act of playing; and 3) the performative role of the body in the constitution of the playful scene. Next, we will explore the theoretical aspects that mobilize and support the analysis of the episode presented.

Playing and the imaginary situation: the driving force of child development

Two questions are central to understanding pretend play: a) its origin in development and b) what is its role in the child's development. These two questions open the text: “Le jeu et son rôle dans le développement psychologique de l'enfant” (VYGOTSKI, 2022) with a central question: would pretend play be a driving force for development or a predominant activity of the child? Vygotski explains: playing is not the predominant activity, but the guiding thread of a child's development.

Critical of perspectives that understand playing as an activity driven by pleasure, Vygotski emphasizes that the dimension of the child's needs, desires and interests mobilize the development of action. In the author's position, it is essential to understand what are the elements that motivate the child's action and how they are articulated at each age. In the specific case of children between approximately 3-7 years old (preschool age), Vygotski observes the emergence of a new type of interest: unrealizable tendencies, desires that are impossible to be immediately satisfied and the possibility of detaching themselves from the perceptual field – something that was not possible to be observed at a previous age. He states: “It seems to me that at preschool age, without the maturation of non-realizable impulses, there would be no playing” (VYGOTSKI, 2022). What we can say is that such non-immediately resolved needs and desires characterize the development of the imaginary situation.

Imagination, in this case, is the new formation that is absent in early childhood, that does not exist in other animals and appears vigorously in the imaginary situation. Here, it is important to emphasize that the child's conduct is not bound to the limits of the concrete event; it is based on the generalization of their affective relationship, which emerges in the imaginary situation. This, however, does not mean that the child is aware of the reasons that lead him to the imaginary situation. She plays because she is impelled to imaginative action.

But what's important about pretend play? What gives meaning to the imaginary situation? The rules that are implied in the game itself, Vygotski would say. Play necessarily involves behavior regulated by the child, through a very particular relationship with socially

constituted rules. What rules are these? First, the rules of behavior, which are not determined in advance, but developed throughout the activity itself. The child then wants to be a teacher and acts according to a teacher's rules of behavior; the way she perceives, generalizes and experiences the social function of being a teacher. The rule of behavior guides the imaginary situation. Therefore, he states that there is no imaginary situation without rules. For him, saying that children are free when they play is an interpretative mistake.

Another characteristic of the pretend game is that which derives from the object itself that guides the action. After all, the child acts independently of what he sees, as his action is guided by the meaning that the object assumes in the imaginary situation. A brick can turn into a radio; a pencil can turn into a plane. This detachment from the perceptual field is only possible thanks to the linguistic and expressive resources that make up the imaginary situation. In early childhood, the word is oriented in space, in the configuration of places that are delimited by a specific situation. But at preschool age, we observe, for the first time, the detachment between the semantic field and the visual field in development.

Detaching the thought (the meaning of the word) from the object is an extremely complex task for the child. The game becomes a way of transitioning to this. The moment the stick, that is, the object, becomes the fulcrum to highlight the meaning of the horse from the real horse, at this critical moment a fundamental psychological structure is radically transformed, the one that determines the child's relationship with the reality (VYGOTSKI, 2022, p. 225, our translation).

And what allows the transformation from the perceptual field to the semantic field? It is the support object, often translated as pivot object, which also configures the imaginary situation.

The child cannot yet separate thought from the object, he must have a point of support in another object, this is where the child's weakness is expressed; to think about the horse, she must determine her actions with the horse with the stick as a support point (VYGOTSKI, 2022, p. 223, our translation).

The object is fundamental to the development of the imaginary situation. And, in relation to it, it is also important to consider certain rules. These are not the social rules of behavior, as we have explored previously, but the rules that circumscribe the object itself.

As we highlighted, the functioning of the object rule lies in the prevalence of its semantic value. Therefore, it is not just any object that can be replaced in the playful action, but only an object that bears a certain relationship with the meaning of the action. The broomstick

can play the role of a horse, but an envelope cannot play a horse to the child. There are conformities between the support object and the imaginary situation. “I would say that the child, in the game, operates with the help of the meaning separated from the object, but this is inseparable from a real action with a real object” (VYGOTSKI, 2022, p. 254, our translation).

Leontiev (2012, p. 131, our translation), once exemplified:

When a child sitting at a table creates a situation in which a person walking represents, for example, a doctor running to see a patient or to go to a pharmacy, a pencil, stick or toothpick can equally represent the person. With these objects, the child can successfully perform the operation of changing positions, that is, the generalized movements required by the action on the toy. But the matter is different when the child has a soft ball in his hands. The required action cannot be performed with it; the movement lacks the characteristic “walking” configuration, and there comes a moment when playful action is no longer possible. Therefore, not every object can play any role in play, or even toys can play different roles, depending on their character, and participate differently in the structure of the game. To avoid returning, especially to this point, let us note, in passing, the main differences that distinguish, in this aspect, the various toy objects.

All the considerations elaborated so far allow us to affirm that the imaginary situation develops from what children experience – directly or indirectly – in their relationship with culture, as presented in the Vygotskian idea (see: the first Law of relationship between imagination and reality in Vygotski, (2022)). This helps us understand that the rules of behavior and the rules of the object, which make up the imaginary situation, emerge from culture. It turns out that children are not restricted to cultural determination, as their ways of (re)producing reality imply a certain creative elaboration. The creation involved in pretend play leads us to several theoretical questions about the role of imagination – a new formation – in child development. Here we are particularly instigated by the aspects involved in the ways of elaborating on reality, via creative processes, which are involved in the development of children with intellectual disabilities.

The play of children with intellectual disabilities in Historical-Cultural Theory

In the texts organized in the book *Fundamentals of Defectology* (works published between 1924-1935), Vygotski (1997, 2019) addressed the problem of the complex functional system. His qualitative analysis of atypical development is, without a doubt, revolutionary for the time. According to him, it is not possible to define how far a child will develop, and organic limitation in itself is not limiting, nor even an impediment to the emergence of intellectual functions. On the contrary, we must pay attention to the emergence of powerful areas of development that appear in children with disabilities, because the compensatory processes are more poignant in them.

In the chapter “The problem of mental retardation” (1997) – one of the last texts written by the author – Vygotsky presents, however, a somewhat pessimistic view of the development of intellectually compromised children. He states that “abstract thinking, like imagination, requires a particular fluidity and mobility of psychological systems and, naturally, this is why in both areas in particular they are incompletely developed in the mentally retarded child” (VYGOTSKI, 1997, p. 258, our translation).

The same pessimistic tone appears in the text about playing entitled “The role of play in the child's psychological development” (VYGOTSKI, 2022). In it, Vygotski (2022, p. 297, our translation) points out that “research shows that it is not only when we are dealing with children with insufficient intellectual development that play does not develop, but also with children whose affective sphere is not sufficiently developed”.

These two quotations – when disjointed from the general context of the work – could give us the impression that Vygotsky was contradictory because, in a way, he would be emphasizing the irreconcilable limitations between the development of children with mental retardation and imaginative functioning. But, based on this premise, it would be inconsistent with the argumentative set defended in his work on defectological issues.

In our opinion, Vygotsky is, in fact, demonstrating that there are, indeed, specificities in the abstract thinking of children with intellectual disabilities, which has implications for their creative processes. He speaks in terms of incompletely developed areas, but does not elaborate exhaustively on what he meant, leaving room for misinterpretation. In short: what did he mean by incompletely developed areas? What are these implications?

To deepen this debate, we propose, in this article, to put on screen the pretend play of children with intellectual disabilities, understanding that the imaginary situation is the driving force (guiding activity) of child development.

Method

In the search to understand the aspects that make up the pretend play of children diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, we opted for a methodology affiliated with Vygotsky's legacy. For the author (2018, p. 37, our translation), the method means the way of investigating (or studying) a defined part of reality: "it is the path of knowledge that leads to the understanding of scientific regularities in some field". To this end, the bases that govern this investigation are anchored in historical-dialectic materialism, which allows the appearance of the studied object to be revealed in order to interpret it in theoretical and analytical light. We are interested in "real individuals, their actions and their material living conditions, both those already encountered by them and those produced by their own action" (MARX; ENGELS, 2009, p. 87, our translation).

For observations, records and decomposition of data, we also followed the guidelines of Vygotsky (2010) which presuppose the refined selection of the researcher's perspective to select the facts that we wish to understand analytically. In these terms, "the first skill (rule) of the scientific observer lies in knowing the set of facts that must be isolated from the rest" (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 287, our translation). The second consists of the researcher's ability to categorize observations by similarity, distributing them into specific analytical groups. The third refers to the understanding of these categories as part of a complex whole that is interconnected, even when divided by methodological issues. Finally, the researcher needs to have the ability not only to describe the facts, but also to be able to explain them. In other words, "to find the causes and relationships based on these data" (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 287, our translation). In the meantime, our focus is on understanding the imaginative and creative processes developed by children with intellectual disabilities in their pretend play, based on a microgenetic analysis.

Microgenetic analysis is a methodological-analytical resource widely used in research based on Historical-Cultural Theory (SILVA, 2017; ALMEIDA, 2018; RIBAS, 2021). It consists of the analysis of micro-events and arises from the interpretation of Vygotsky's studies that "it was exactly in the here and now of actions and interactions in the face of a problem situation that the richest mental processes were found" (KELMAN; BRANCO, 2004, p. 95, our translation). Thus, from a detailed and refined look at intersubjective, dialogical and mediational issues, we are able to perceive the emergence of psychological activities in their context and within the specific action of the moment. Therefore, in movement, contextualized and understood as a process.

Góes (2000, p. 15, our translation) clarifies that this type of analysis is not micro due to its duration in the space-time of the event that is intended to be analyzed, “but rather because it is oriented towards indexical minutiae – hence the need for cut-offs in time which tends to be restricted.” Genetics is linked to the historical and procedural dimension of what is analyzed, and to the intersection of phylogenetic, ontogenetic and sociogenetic planes, to explain psychological phenomena. It receives this name “because it focuses on movement during processes and relates past and present conditions, trying to explore what, in the present, is permeated with future projection” (GÓES, 2000, p. 15, our translation).

Contextualization of field research and participants

The present study was carried out in a class of a special class of ⁵ intellectual disability-multiple disability, in a public school, in an Administrative Region of the Federal District, Brazil. The research was developed during the first semester of 2018, with video recording of 4 hours per week of emerging situations at school, which directly or indirectly evidenced the game of make-believe. The total amount of material built in the field totals 60 hours of data transcribed in detail. Here, we cut an episode for the analysis of the above-mentioned issues.

The class studied is part of a temporary and transitional class, created exclusively for students with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities, without classification, totaling three children (Gael, Ana and Iza). The class is led by a teacher (qualified in Pedagogy and specialized in specialized educational services) with proven aptitude in the area of special education, working 40 hours a week, and has the support of a monitor.

Four children participated in the research: Iza, Gael, Martin and Ana (7-10 years old). Martin was not from the class researched, but from another special class, aimed at students with autism spectrum disorder, who shared recess with the other children and participated in the episode analyzed in this article. The children demonstrated disparate profiles, especially regarding cognitive, linguistic and independence aspects in daily life. They are presented in detail below:

⁵ In the Federal District, the special class is admitted, which, according to the Pedagogical Orientation of Special Education of the Department of Education of the Federal District (2010), is intended, extraordinarily and temporarily, for students with disabilities and autism spectrum disorder.

Iza ⁶(7 years old) – Diagnosed with intellectual disability, physical disability (used a wheelchair) and low vision. She expressed herself well orally, despite echolalia and the systematic repetition of themes. He had severe sialorrhea, requiring constant assistance to carry out activities of daily living.

Gael (8 years old) – He had medical reports of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dysmorphia, chromosomal abnormality (unspecified) and intellectual disability. At times, the phonological reading route was used, decoding the letters without extracting the complete meaning. Can recognize and write the alphabet relating grapheme-phoneme, identify and write first name with simple letters, as well as simple words with assistance.

Martin (8 years old) – Has a report of autism spectrum disorder. He expressed himself relatively well and had difficulty staying in the classroom, which hindered his participation in the tasks provided by the teacher.

Ana (10 years old) – She was diagnosed with intellectual disability. He demonstrated difficulties in expressing himself orally, making syllabic sounds without completing a word. He recognized some letters and expressed good autonomy in solving practical problems.

There is a point that deserves to be considered in relation to the chronological age of the children researched, as they are between 7-10 years old, which corresponds, in the historical-cultural periodization of development, to school age. It is a fact that at school age we still identify the emergence of make-believe, but imaginary situations develop more vigorously at preschool age, as discussed previously. So, it would be appropriate to ask: why choose school-age children to research pretend play?

The answer to this question needs to be understood through the confluence of three central aspects of Historical-Cultural Theory: the problem of age, environment and development with an emphasis on pedological age. Vygotski (2018), when discussing these issues in “Fourth Class: the problem of the environment in Pedology”, was referring to children with typical development, but this does not mean excluding children with intellectual disabilities from these considerations. After all, the three aforementioned aspects deserve to be especially considered in research on intellectual disabilities, as the contradictions between chronological age and pedological age are even more striking in these cases, showing that the focus of the analysis cannot be on the maturational, chronological and quantitative aspects, but

⁶The names of the participants were changed and authorization to participate in the research was given by their legal guardians by signing the Informed Consent Form and the Assignment Term of Right to Use Image and Voice. The research was governed by Resolution No. 466, of 2012, of the National Health Council.

qualitative – as Vygotski would say. Regarding this, it is still worth highlighting that, for Vygotski, pedological age involves the “level of development that the child has actually reached” (VYGOTSKI, 2018, p. 20, our translation) because “the time and content of development change in the different years of life and child development” (VYGOTSKI, 2018, p. 19, our translation). So, if a 7 or 10 year old child plays pretend, what does this tell us about their developmental cycles ? This is the point that interests us here, since “the environment is the source of development of these specifically human characteristics and qualities” (VYGOTSKI, 2018, p. 90, our translation).

Procedure and data analysis

The material videorecorded in the field, by means of a camcorder, was transcribed in full, collated with the field diary and organized in the form of episodes, with the objective of establishing analytical axes capable of responding to the objectives outlined for this research. We identified, in the total body of the research, two axes of analysis: 1. The use of support objects in the play of children diagnosed with intellectual disability and 2. The link between creative processes and reality in the structuring of the imaginative contexts of the participating children. In this article, we will deal with the first axis of analysis, analyzing a representative episode of the research carried out.

Results and data analysis

In the episode presented below, experienced in the dynamics of the school, we highlight which particular elements make up the play of children with intellectual disabilities, when they use support objects to combine and recombine the elements of reality and thus compose the playful scene. In the brief episode, we highlight the interactions between child-child, child-adult and child-object, in which expressive and bodily resources are revealed in a powerful way.

Episode 1: Plastic box and stick!

Students Gael, Iza and Ana are in the classroom. The teacher is sitting next to Gael, carrying out a language activity. On the opposite side, there are Iza and Ana, who manipulate the modeling clay under the supervision of the monitor. As break approaches – and noticing the rain falling –, Gael apprehensively asks the teacher: – Auntie, will there be recess?

The teacher explains yes. But please note that recess will be in the covered courtyard, close to the cafeteria.

Gael makes a facial expression of discontent.

The siren sounds indicating the start of the break. The teacher asks Gael to wait, so she can finish the activity she was developing with him. Gael gets impatient. The other students do not show any reaction and continue to work with the modeling clay.

When allowed to go to break, the student takes a small plastic box from his backpack and runs towards the covered area. Iza and Ana are led by the monitor and sit with her on the bench close to the space where the break takes place.

Gael then starts running around the yard, making shooting movements with the plastic box, shooting sounds with his mouth and, at times, moving his body in an attempt to dodge shots. He simulates shots randomly and alone. He hides between the pillars as if he were dodging a possible attack.

Martin, who was walking through the courtyard, decides to join Gael's game. He takes a stick, aims it at Gael and acts like he's shooting. The two simulate a chase and, using the plastic box and the stick, shoot each other.

The monitor, who was watching the scene, intervenes. He takes the stick out of Martin's hand and asks the students to play something else. Gael listens to the recommendations, puts the plastic box on his waist and continues running through the space, however, without simulating shooting or chasing. Martin, on the other hand, chooses to end the game and sits down with Iza and Ana.

Gael anxiously awaits the break. The rain and the teacher's decision to continue activities, even after the siren sounded, generate anguish and discontent. In the class, we noticed that Gael is the only student who shows some anxiety about the break and the games. His desire is so great that he often brings toys and objects from home that he intends to use during playtime. When they are not household instruments, he takes toys or materials from the classroom and takes them to the playground. During the game, Gael usually pretends to be a police officer or a thief. The plot always involves chase and action, as well as a scenography that sets up the playful scene: the pillars, for example, act as protection from an attack.

The viewer can see that this is a playful performance in which one can observe: 1) social roles represented; 2) the symbolic transgression of objects (plastic box that turns into a weapon); and 3) the participation of bodily and expressive resources in the composition of the imaginary situation. Below, we explore these aspects.

Vygotski (2022) explains that the child has specific needs and desires to act in the culture. Their desires are objectively unrealizable. But, when the child plays, she/he satisfies

her desires for access and action in the adult universe, which is why she “reproduces the relationships and work activities of adults in a playful way” (MUKHINA, 1997, p. 155, our translation). Gael wants to shoot, handle a gun, be a police officer/thief, but these actions are impossible for him, so he plays. Play, therefore, must always be understood as an imaginary and fantasy fulfillment of unrealizable desires (VYGOTSKI, 2022).

In play, “each child learns to behave according to the general situation of the game and the concrete composition of the group” (MUKHINA, 1997, p. 164, our translation). This comment by the author is consistent with Martin's entry into Gael's game. There are no prior arrangements. Without exchanging words, Martin takes on a supporting role in the context and interacts with Gael, who readily welcomes him into the game.

However, even though Gael's pretend play takes place in a space that provides a less directed activity, his action when playing is governed by rules, as we need to remember that whenever there is an imaginative situation in the context of play, it is governed by rules (VYGOTSKI, 2022). The rules are inherent to the game and do not require prior agreement, as they are negotiated and developed at the heart of the imaginary situation. In this way, the rules that are experienced in play are different from those of a normative-impositive nature that come from adults, as they are determined by the action itself, with the objective of coherence to what is enacted. Gael, for example, is governed by the social rules that are intrinsic to the social role he assumes; he plays at being a police/robber. Regarding this, Mukhina (1997, p. 160, our translation) highlights that it is through play that “children get to know the social lives of adults, they better understand the social functions and the rules by which adults govern their relationships”.

Another point that catches our attention in the episode presented is that children behave beyond the immediate perceptual field: they are not tied to what they see (VYGOTSKI, 2009; VYGOTSKI, 2022). By a kind of substitution, the pillar becomes a protective device, the plastic box and the stick become a weapon. As we discussed previously, the detachment from the real function of the object to an action guided by its playful substitute is only possible to be observed in children of preschool age, when the development of imagination occurs as a new formation. At this age, “the child operates with objects as if they had a meaning, they operate with the meaning of words, which replace objects, this occurs because in play words are emancipated from objects” (VYGOTSKI, 2022, p. 312, our translation). The authentic creative activity of playing only happens when the child is able to perform an action that implies another, manipulating one object supposing another (MUKHINA, 1997; LEONTIEV, 2012).

As we discussed previously, intellectual disability is not an impediment to the development of the imaginary situation; quite the opposite. Although it is commonly characterized as one that generates significant limitations, with regard to cognitive, imaginative functioning and adaptive behavior, – causing difficulties in the subject's performance with regard to social, conceptual and practical skills –, we can see that Gael reveals important elements about their imaginative functioning. The object gains meaning in the game of cops and robbers; Gael and Martin hold the gun, dodge bullets, run, hide behind the pillar. The playful scene represented by the boys presents imaginative activities that not only reproduce, but create, update and expand their understanding of their own social reality.

Gael, for example, does not have a toy gun (or other accessories to carry out the desired game), the setting (in this case, the courtyard) was certainly not the ideal place for the activity developed. Despite these limitations, he can – through imagination – transform concrete reality, objects and create scenarios to make his play possible.

In this dynamic, we emphasize that the movements, as well as the expressive and bodily resources used during the game make up the playful scene. Martin reads the movements and expressive and bodily resources that Gael performs and – as the playful scene is part of his cultural repertoire – he also decides to participate in the game. Here, children interact beyond the verbal enunciation itself: after all, it is the body that also plays. Inseparable from the mind, the body assumes centrality in the playful event, and recent research has emphasized this aspect (COSTA, 2018; PACHECO, 2021). The understanding that mind-body integrates a unit is a fundamental assumption for the analysis of play, implying new understandings about the elements that involve the activity: ways of describing and interpreting it. A police chase, for example, involves actions that gain meaning in the expressions that the bodies make in the game shared between the boys.

Regarding this, it is important to highlight that Martin becomes a companion in representing Gael and they begin to compose the same plot. Here, we can notice a relationship between the boys and the events of everyday life, which takes on an imaginative dimension. When he starts shooting at Gael during the game, we realize Martin's need, desire and motivation to be part of the game. After all, when children play collectively, this activity becomes rich, as they learn to coordinate their actions with pretend play partners and help each other (BARBATO; MIETO, 2015). In other words, Gael and Martin show us that through pretend play there is no need for a systematic invitation for the other's participation to occur. Gael assumes a role and plays. Imagine and, in playful action, compose your character. The

game is, therefore, scheduled without pre-defined scripts, which allows, in the action of the moment, the plot to transform and become more flexible, bringing fluidity to the playful dynamics represented.

In addition to the aspects mentioned above, we would like to problematize the monitor's attitude towards the argument and the content of the game. This question seems important to us because it concerns the ways in which adults intervene in children's playful activities. Mukhina (1997) explains that dramatic games, with the incorporation of roles, are organized around the argument and content. The former concerns the reality that is represented in the act of play – and the greater the child's social experiences, the broader and more varied the arguments will be. The content, in turn, refers to the detail of the argument, that is: the script of the scene that the children present in pretend play – what emanates from the intersubjective game of the roles articulated in the scene. In the episode described, the argument is the police chase, and the content is the way in which Gael and Martin relate to each other to give meaning to the scene, maintaining its coherence; They shoot at each other, dodge, hide between pillars, etc. The argument and content of Martin and Gael's joke seem to make the monitor uncomfortable. What is the cause of the discomfort?

We live in a culture where it is not common and recommended for children to handle toy weapons as they are linked to aggression and death. Hence the monitor's discomfort: a certain feeling that the game is inappropriate. However, Gael's interests turn to this theme because the playful experience seems to engender in boys' feelings of bravery, attack and fearlessness (among others). Here, the mobilizing affections of playing deserve attention.

Regarding issues of affection, Vygotski states that the imaginary situation “teaches (the child) not to blindly follow feelings, but to coordinate them with the rules of the game and with its final objective” (VYGOTSKI, 2010, p. 123, our translation). In other words: in the game, children's emotions regulate (and are, dialectically, regulated) by the meaning of what is staged. Experiencing these police and robber situations, for example, is fundamental for a child's development. These are situations that imply the expansion of subjective experience, which necessarily involves a greater generalization of affects, which are mobilized during the imaginary situation. Here, moral judgments, in most cases, are not positive for the development of the game, as they restrict, restrain and prevent its happening.

It turns out that, within this context of analysis, another point needs to be problematized: the affective mobilization of the monitor resulting from the imaginary situation she experiences as a spectator. Here, the monitor reveals her attention to the game; she observes what the boys

create and is affected by the imaginary situation. As someone who observes and scrutinizes the boys' playful action, she also reveals their ways of reacting to what is being represented. In other words, the affective implications of playing are not restricted to the child, but also point to important questions about the adult's own role in the meaning attributed to the activity.

The highlighted notes reveal the creative power of the children investigated. But we cannot ignore the fact that children with intellectual disabilities present particularities in the processes that involve abstraction and generalization. Gael, for example, during the research carried out, preferably played police and robber. This playful theme was always suggested by the boy, with little variation in the pattern and plot of the game (ABREU, 2019). We can say that there was a certain rigidity, both in the choice of theme and in the use of substitute objects. This seemed to us to be a particularity of the play of children with intellectual disabilities. This is not an obstacle, but an important specificity of your psyche.

Regarding this, Vygotski (2019, p. 336, our translation), while partially agreeing with the investigations of Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), states, in the text “Problems of Mental Retardation”, that:

[...] the child with mental weakness manifests, at the same time, a peculiar restraint and a fixation that excludes for him the possibility of replacement activities; however, it also retains the clearly expressed tendency to replace difficult activities with easier and more primitive forms.

This statement by Vygotsky is intriguing and can be taken in its negativity. Would the author be going against his initial ideas and focusing on the child's defect and limitations? A hasty reading of this dense text may lead the less attentive reader to this hasty conclusion. However, Vygotski advances in the analysis and, by breaking with the hegemonic conceptions of his time: intellectualism, by Edouard Seguin (1812-1880), and voluntarism, by Kurt Lewin, reorients the discussion in a new direction by placing the debates the problem of human consciousness: the affect-intellect unity.

For Vygotsky, both theories mentioned above were unable to overcome their epistemological limitations and lacked the historical-dialectic materialism to better explain the development of children with intellectual disabilities. For him, it was essential to review theoretical precepts, put the question upside down, and think about the problem from the indivisible unity of intellect-affect. This position of the author allows us to affirm that the cause and consequence exchange places.

Superior psychic formations, when they emerge, based on certain dynamic premises, exert a retroactive influence on the processes that give rise to them. In Historical-cultural Psychology, the lowest changes to the highest: “not only do the physiological functions themselves change, but also in the first place, the interfunctional links and the relationships between the different processes vary, particularly between affect and intellect” (VYGOTSKI, 2019, p. 345-346, our translation). Here, we have the defense that intellectual processes and actions do not arise involuntarily, as they are driven by dynamic processes, needs and affective impulses. Therefore, our thinking is always psychologically conditioned and results from an affective impulse that moves and directs it.

Supported by Spinoza, Vygotski (2019, p. 351, our translation) continues to state “affect as what increases or decreases our body’s capacity for activity and forces thought to move in a certain direction”. Here, then, we have the central functional nexus: the relationship between thought (intellect-affect unity) and activity. Or more specifically: the meaning of the action for the child.

For Vygotsky, this qualitatively changes the way the child engages in the activity and mobilizes their psychological processes. He takes into account the affects involved, the flexibility or rigidity in the face of activities “and, at the same time, the still deficient stability, fixation and diffusion of the processes that take place in the child's nervous system and psyche” (VYGOTSKI, 2019, note 147, p. 338, our translation). In line with this argument, it is important for us to consider that playing is a dynamic and fundamental activity that explores such causal links. This deserves to be highlighted because when children play, even with their particularities, they have the potential to reorganize their psychological functions as a way of overcoming the limitations they experience in their social activities: their play is full of meaning and mobilizes new ways of thinking about the real, about the other and about oneself.

Final comments

Throughout the text, we seek to understand the imaginative and creative processes of playing in children with intellectual disabilities. We chose playing, as suggested by Vygotski, as the driving line of development, taking a significant episode to reflect on the emergence of make-believe.

The selected episode reveals imaginative and, therefore, creative processes in the play of children with intellectual disabilities. After all, Gael (one of the participating children)

elaborates, through his imaginative resources, his make-believe: he represents characters from the cultural universe, transgresses the perceptual impositions of objects and composes imagined playful scenarios. The ways in which their imaginary situation is configured reveal “an echo of what the child saw and heard from adults” (VYGOTSKI, 2009, p. 17, our translation). Here, play is not understood as a simple memory of what was accessed in social experience, but rather “a creative re-elaboration of experienced impressions” (VYGOTSKI, 2009, p. 17, our translation). This allows us to affirm that there is an authorial mark on make-believe.

All children – regardless of their developmental specificities – produce culture by exercising their creative potential, registering a unique signature about what they create and elaborate: they leave their marks. We agree that “betting on the intellectual and artistic capabilities of subjects is based on the assumption that everyone can create and all creation, whether or not carried out collectively, is social” (MAHEIRIE; BARRETO, 2019, p. 121, our translation).

In this line of argument, the study by Mendonça (2013) deserves to be highlighted because it highlights the creative nature of the development of children with intellectual disabilities. For the author, these children develop a more potentially complex neurological reorganization capacity than those without disabilities. This occurs, especially, when they are called upon to actively participate in the cultural and, therefore, educational contexts in which they are included. In this sense, the playful dimension is fundamental because it involves aspects that relate the intellectual and affective dimensions of psychological functioning. In other words, reducing, weakening, restricting the emergence of playful situations in children with intellectual disabilities is keeping them trapped in the fixity of their behavior, reinforcing patterns of behavior and psychological functioning that do not contribute to their development.

The focus of the school, especially the teachers, should be the opposite. Playful experiences are essential in the life of children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, adults and other children must play with them, propose playful scenarios and themes, operating in an increasingly complex way, with the replacement of objects, enriching and bringing vitality to the game. Playing is a fruitful activity that promotes new developmental cycles, as it allows children with intellectual disabilities to act beyond their usual skills and everyday behavior. It is an activity that should be the focus of interest of educators and, therefore, deserves to be deeply studied.

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