

DIALOGUING WITH CHILDREN: WHAT DO WE LEARN WITH THEM?

DIALOGAR COM CRIANÇAS: O QUE APRENDEMOS COM ELAS?

DIALOGAR CON LOS NIÑOS: ¿QUÉ APRENDEMOS CON ELLOS?



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ABSTRACT: The article discusses ways of dialoguing with children in the context of qualitative research in education. The study is based on children's narratives about their experiences in institutions for children. The theoretical framework is presented first, followed by a focus on the research scenarios, the challenges of the methods and protocols used over eleven years of research with children. The aim is to problematize the unfolding of these dialogues from the perspective of the researcher and the learning that takes place mutually between researchers and children. The conclusion is that these dialogues are important as a necessary basis for the formation of the researcher, the child, their teachers and the implementation of public policies for the well-being of children in the institutions responsible for them.

KEYWORDS: Narrative reflexivity. Agentivity. Children's narratives. Biographical learning.

RESUMO: O artigo coloca em debate modos de dialogar com crianças no âmbito da pesquisa qualitativa em educação. O estudo pauta-se em narrativas de crianças sobre as experiências por elas vividas em instituições voltadas para a infância. Apresenta-se, inicialmente, o quadro teórico para em seguida focalizar os cenários da pesquisa, os desafios de métodos e protocolos utilizados ao longo de onze anos de pesquisas realizadas *com* crianças. O interesse é problematizar o desdobramento desses diálogos sob o prisma do olhar de quem pesquisa e das aprendizagens que se fazem mutuamente entre pesquisadores e crianças. Conclui-se pela importância desses diálogos como base necessária à formação do pesquisador, da criança, de seus professores e de implementação de políticas públicas para o bem-estar da criança nas instituições por elas responsáveis.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Reflexividade narrativa. Agentividade. Narrativas de crianças. Aprendizagens biográficas.

RESUMEN: *Este artículo analiza las formas de entablar un diálogo con los niños en el contexto de la investigación cualitativa en educación. El estudio se basa en los relatos de los niños sobre sus experiencias en instituciones para la infancia. En primer lugar, se presenta el marco teórico, seguido de un enfoque sobre los escenarios de la investigación, los desafíos de los métodos y protocolos utilizados a lo largo de once años de investigación con niños. El objetivo es problematizar el desarrollo de estos diálogos desde la perspectiva del investigador y el aprendizaje que tiene lugar mutuamente entre investigadores y niños. La conclusión es que estos diálogos son importantes como base necesaria para la formación del investigador, del niño, de sus profesores y para la implementación de políticas públicas para el bienestar de los niños en las instituciones responsables de ellos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Reflexividad narrativa. Agentividad. Narrativas infantiles. Aprendizaje biográfico.*

By way of introduction: reflexivity and daydreams, for or against the child's word?

The subtlety of something new revives origins, renews and redoubles the joy of wonder

(Gaston Bachelard, 2006, p. 3, our translation)

Narrative reflexivity, as an eminently human disposition, is one of these key notions to address the ways in which humans unfold as objects of reflection and reflective beings, becoming more aware of themselves and the world, by apprehending, examining and judging experiences lived or imagined. This notion puts language, thought and social praxis into play, in an inseparable way. However, when it comes to children, it is little studied. The paradox is that neglecting it in childhood is also leaving important aspects to the sidelines for understanding how children constitute their awareness of themselves and the world as subjects of rights. The consequence of the lack of research focused on this issue reduces scientific evidence capable of validating the production of knowledge, arising from children's speech. What Jean Piaget (1936/1975) did not neglect when creating the clinical method to establish a conversation with children, respecting their ways of being and thinking, to then conceive the epistemic subject in their process of cognitive development.

These representations of childhood would be more against than in favor of the legitimacy of the child's word as a source of research. For this reason, results from research with children about their own experiences tend to be more illustrative than decisive in serving as an anchor for crucial and organizational issues in education.

However, a second reason may be even more compelling: the ethical difficulties and research methods that allow dialogue with children, respecting precisely their capacity for imagination and creativity as a source of life and a unique way of situating themselves in the pre-existing world of children and adults. This was the main reason that prevented us from entering the world of childhood for some time, after long years of research with teachers' narratives.

Now, the big observation for most adults, and what we are interested in highlighting here, is that the imagination and creation of fantastic worlds, present in childhood, tend to invalidate the child's words. In turn, from the perspective of Bachelard (2006), the ability to inhabit the territory of daydreams allows the freedom to exist without limits, to dream and build fantastic worlds introducing the new and as stated in the epigraph above, newness reanimates, renews and awakens the joy of wonder. However, few wonder why this ability, so present in childhood, disappears in most adults.

Results of our research (PASSEGGI *et al.*, 2014) demonstrate that this decline begins as children gradually incorporate the functions of school into their lives. If for children aged 4 to 5, at the beginning of schooling, “*School is a place to play*”, from the age of 6, when they realize the transition process, they admit that “*School is for everything*”. At the age of 8, they see their playfulness disappear, when they realize the transition to Elementary I: “*School is for studying and “playing a little”*”, so that, at the end of the journey, from the age of 9, they feel threatened: “*School is for learning, if not...*”. So, taking seriously, in scientific research, the narrative reflexivity of children, when they talk about their lives at school, in the family, or in other institutions where they lived their childhood, is to venture into the unexplored universe of their ability to put in words what is inscribed in your body, in your thoughts and in your ways of acting in the world.

We agree with Sarmiento (2008, p. 4, our translation), when he states that “for a long (certainly too) long time, Education Sciences expelled children from their field of analysis, to deal exclusively with students” and with that they also expelled them from their field of interest “the reality of children, with their social living conditions, their own cultural forms, their desires, emotions, aspirations and practices”. Trend consecrated by instrumental rationality and disembodied scientism, which disregards emotions, the body and sensitivity, seen as by-products in the constitution of individuals and society.

In three research projects with children³, coordinated and vice-coordinated by the authors and jointly developed by an international network of researchers⁴, with the purpose of understanding the meaning that children attributed to the experiences they had at school, in the family, in hospitals and clinics, we start with a provocative question: *Is what children say about school (or the hospital class) worthy of interest for educational research, teacher training and public policies aimed at childhood?* A question that has become, over the last eleven years, the thesis we defend today. Indeed, what children say about their school experiences, or not, is worthy of being taken seriously. And dialogue with them constitutes the necessary basis for rethinking their own formation as subjects of rights, teacher training and the implementation of public policies aimed at the well-being of children in the institutions responsible for them.

³ “Children's narratives: what children tell about childhood schools” (CNPq-CAPES, n. 401519/2011-2); “Childhood narratives: what children tell about school and teachers about childhood” (n. 462119/2014-9); “Narrative, education and health: children, families and teachers between the hospital and the school” (process no. 443695/2018-0).

⁴The research network is made up of researchers from France, Portugal, Colombia and Brazil.

Our objective is to present here a reflection on the methodology of research with children, based on our concerns and learning, as researchers, over the last eleven years, in search of understanding with them their ways of narrating and giving meaning to the world in which they live where they are located, what they do or cannot do in it.

We initially present a summary of the notions of childhood and children. Next, the theoretical framework of (auto)biographical research on which our research with children has been based since 2012. Next, we will provide a synthetic description of the research scenarios, before considering our entry into the field. The interest is to problematize the unfolding of dialogues with children from the perspective of those who research the learning we did with them.

Childhood, children and school: notes

For Sarmiento (2011), public school became one of the axes in the delineation of the idea of modern childhood, as the process of socialization of children, from the 18th century onwards, ceased to be restricted to spontaneous forms and became formalized in specific institutions to carry out the task of transmitting values and knowledge. The school then asserted itself as an international human right in democratic societies. Therefore, it is no surprise that, from generation to generation, such ideas guide the representation of school, where children enter earlier and earlier and are convinced that they are there to "be people when they grow up", "so that, in the future, be better".

Lewkowicz (2008) argues that the modern adult places children in the family and school, and in the productivist logic, the family produces children and schools produce students. Children, in turn, become the sum of these two social roles, having their voice silenced, which excludes them from the established discourse. In our research, some children even admit that they are tired beforehand, wondering if their school career will be as long as that of their parents and grandparents, who are still studying and graduating. In hospital classes, where the body, emotions and well-being become a priority, children undergoing treatment for chronic illnesses speak of the "little school" as a space that helps them to be "happy again".

Sibilia (2012) helps us understand that the school, when considered an institution that created its own technologies and did not substantially renew them, is in dissonance with the constitution of subjectivities that are no longer configured only within families and schools, but in the midst of electronic devices that have contributed to new values and rapid changes in behavior. According to the author, this disconnect between the world of children and the world

of school became more pronounced from the moment schools stopped being the most appropriate space-time to access the new and, why not say, a place of well-being.

Including children and young people in research carried out in contemporary times gains importance, as the majority are no longer on the margins of digital society and their participation in social networks makes their ways of thinking, acting, and feeling increasingly visible, making them adults, often perplexed, do not know exactly how to face the challenges of educating children and young people in the new social contexts that are emerging today. By producing their own cultures, inside and outside school, in interaction with peers, with the media, they feel increasingly capable of thinking and constructing meanings for their experiences, to the point that they no longer fully fit into the job. Through games, rituals, dialogues established between them, and more recently on social networks, children escape the roles assigned to them and become part of the culture, causing social transformations.

(Auto)biographical research with children: an expanding territory

According to Corsaro (2011), the first studies *with* children, from the perspective of the sociology of childhood, did not develop specific methods to dialogue *with* them. These studies include macro-level research, demographic studies, large-scale research and historical methods. This is why they do not differ substantially from traditional methods used in research with adults. Corsaro (2011) also states that when it comes to micro-level methods, they now have great potential because they do not focus on transforming the child into an adult, but rather on the experiences and challenges they face to find themselves, with some freedom, in the world of powerful adults.

(Auto)biographical research, in which we are located, is an aspect of qualitative research, which privileges micro-level methods. It maintains its specificities by adopting a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective, based on narratives of experiences lived and examined by those who lived them. It is admitted from the outset that the doors to the interior of the inner world can only be opened by those who have the keys. As Breton (2023, p. 117, our translation) states, “[...] only the subject who lived the experience can bring it to language”. However, (auto)biographical research is not limited to making narrative a method of accessing this inner world as the basis of phenomenological research. What is most interesting in this aspect is what is human, as it inseparably articulates thought, language and social praxis to give meaning to what has been lived, what has stopped living, or imagines that it could live. In fact,

it cannot be forgotten that one of the assumptions of (auto)biographical research, as its name indicates, is that the human, when appropriating language (graphy) to narrate life (bios) and what happens to himself (self), becomes more aware of himself and his action in the world of life. And in this way, he constitutes himself as a subject, reinvents himself by reinterpreting himself in transformation.

From this perspective, in our research we consider that:

The child, like the adult, even if subordinated to social rules, always has room for initiative and decision to reconstruct their reality in its entirety, with their way of thinking, feeling and their desires, asserting themselves as a subject biographical, supported by narrative reflexivity, understood as a human disposition, which develops from early childhood (FURLANETTO; PASSEGGI; BIASOLI, 2020, p. 83-84, our translation).

In this sense, Lewkowicz (2008) reinforces the idea that in order to dialogue with children it is necessary to first admit that they are capable of thinking, reflecting and generating other thoughts regarding their own reflection. (Auto)biographical research, through the study of self-referential narratives, aims to understand the processes of socialization and subjectivation, through which humans develop. It is, therefore, a field that interrogates processes of construction of subjectivities that develop in a dialectical relationship between the people who narrate and the social contexts in which this type of biographical knowledge is produced. Those who research and those who find themselves in the position of research participant, when focusing on questions of their interests, make thinkable what could have previously gone unnoticed. Action that requires both authorship and authenticity, but not an ontological truth or simply an exchange of information.

(Auto)biographical research includes oneself and others, their stories and the time in which the experiences are lived. For Delory-Momberger (2016, p. 136, our translation), “[...] the human individual lives each moment of his life as the moment of a story: the story of an instant, the story of an hour, a day, the story of a life”.

For a dialogical perspective on research with children

“Become a child again!” This message, Mills and Crowley (1999, p. 201) tell us, can be really useful for anyone who wants to get closer to children. However, letting the child that lives within us live within us is for many an impossible task and above all contrary to the canons of academic research. Which may justify why it is relegated to the margins of consciousness in

the process of becoming adults and researchers. Corsaro (2011, p. 64, our translation) admits that “[...] gaining acceptance in children's worlds is especially challenging, given that adults are physically larger than children, more powerful and often seen as having control over children's behavior”. Thus, in his ethnographic studies with children, to gain their acceptance, he opted for recess at school, when they could interact more freely. And the children, considering him an atypical adult, a kind of big child, ended up inviting him to participate in their activities and talk to him.

A brief review of the literature shows us the importance of letting the child that lives within us be reborn. Abrams (1999), for example, considers that the child we once were can become a guide for our encounters with other children. And not just to do research, but to take ownership of who we become and not lose ourselves. This is what Jung (1981) states in his autobiography, reinforcing this power that lives dormant within us. After his break with Freud, feeling thrown into an internal turmoil, and not knowing how to continue his work without being his follower, he remembered his childhood as a moment in his life when he felt truly creative. And he was willing to play in an attempt to find the lost keys to his creativity:

Every day after lunch, if time permitted, I indulged in construction toys. As soon as the meal was finished, I "played" until the moment when the sick started to arrive: in the afternoon, if my work had finished in time, I would return to the buildings. With this my thoughts became clear and I was able to learn, more precisely, fantasies of which until then I had only had a vague premonition (JUNG, 1981, p. 155, our translation).

Returning to childhood therefore demands creativity and imagination to connect dialogically with the child that lives within us and with those with whom we wish to interact, seeking to understand their relationships and ours with the world of life (*Lebenswelte*), which we live and experience daily.

What would *(auto)biographical research with children be for us today?* When reviewing our journey *with* them, we admit with Lewkowicz (2008) that the knowledge that is produced *about* the child does not produce their subjectivity, does not interfere in their way of constituting themselves as a subject. However, thinking *with* children produces bonds and encourages them to expand their repertoire of representations of the world of life based on reflection on what happens and what happens to them. This is one of the fundamental ethical assumptions of research with children, young people and adults within the scope of the *(auto)biographical paradigm* (PASSEGGI, 2023).

When we were questioned by the Ethics Committee (CONEPE), about the benefits and harms of the research, we were able to better explain as benefits, both the aforementioned assumption of (auto)biographical research, according to which by narrating what we experience, we reinvent ourselves, learn about ourselves and the other, regarding the dialogical conception of *conversation circles with children*. The circles also come close to the “research circles” that extend into “culture circles” used by Paulo Freire in his literacy work with adults who had been denied this human right. As Freire (1969/1983, p. 44, our translation) suggests, “What is intended with dialogue, in any hypothesis, is the problematization of knowledge itself in its indisputable relationship with the concrete reality in which it is generated and on which it affects, to better understand it, explain it, transform it”.

The human world is, therefore, a world of intersubjective interaction. Researching *with* children is no exception to this rule, it is about dialoguing *with* them so that they (researcher and children), through narrative reflexivity, can problematize the world of life together, better understand their actions with others, with themselves, for a better world. When narrating, children appropriate language and by transforming their points of view into words they humanize and humanize the world on the scale of their knowledge in order to project themselves into it. From this perspective, (auto)biographical research in education becomes educational for everyone who participates in it. To this end, it is necessary that, in the situation of *educational research*, researchers, and children assume the role of curious people, who believe in each other's potential to learn something new from each other about subjects of interest to them, in conversation circles that take place without directives.

Research scenarios and conversation circles in the world of “pretend”

There are many suggestions on how to interact with children in order to observe the principles of ethics in research: becoming a child again; be interested in what they have to say; be patient; respect your feelings; be honest; make conversations fun. In short, *be present* in the interaction with them. What it means to assume the attitude of someone who looks with respect, listens carefully and moves with her between different worlds: that of childhood, that of adults, that of imagination. But there are also suggestions about what not to do: do not assume the role of a questioner, interested only in the answers to your research; avoid the role of the detective, who tries to go beyond what the child is willing to share; do not assume the figure of the diviner, who anticipates meanings without letting them reflect on their experiences.

So what is our place? To dialogue with children, we break with the canonical methods of questions and answers that generally guide interviews with adults and tend to jeopardize the horizontality of spontaneous dialogues. The research was carried out with children aged 4 to 13 years old and in different environments (school, family, hospitals and clinics) and in three regions of Brazil in order to minimally contemplate the country's cultural diversity. In the North region, children from the Macuxi, Taurepang, Wapixana people, an Amazon community and children who lived in Laranjal do Jari in Amapá, participated in the research. In Maranhão and Rio Grande do Norte, the dialogue took place with children from remaining quilombola communities and in schools in rural areas. In Natal, São Paulo, Recife and Rio de Janeiro, children from schools at three Brazilian universities collaborated, as well as from schools on the urban outskirts and children undergoing health care in clinics, homes and hospitals ⁵.

The purpose of choosing the age group from 4 to 13 years old was to adopt a transversal perspective, with the aim of observing, in their narratives, how their ways of giving meaning to their school and illness experiences evolved. To embrace this cultural and age diversity, we needed a common instrument that would allow us to discuss the results obtained by the team implementing the project. We then resort to the research protocol designed by Martine Lani-Bayle (2020) and adapted to our circumstances. It was a “make-believe” situation. Alien, a small alien, who lived on a planet where there were no schools (or hospitals), wants to listen to the children, before making the decision whether or not to build schools (hospitals) on his planet. The interest of the protocol is that it served the following purposes: a) avoid face- to -face interviews; b) promote children's critical reflection regarding cultural negotiations with the Alien about the school and the hospital; c) provoke a spontaneous estrangement, which would enable them to deal with possible conflicts; and d) contemplate characteristics of children's culture: playfulness, imagery, interactivity and reiteration, as Sarmiento (2003) suggest, creativity and freedom to imagine fantastic worlds.

We opted for *conversation circles* that are, in general, part of the school routine in reading corners, storytelling corners, for example, so that they would feel free to enter and leave the circle as they pleased. In this context, Alien assumed the role of mediator between children and the school or hospital, leaving them free to say what they experienced and how they experienced their childhood in these spaces. In order for the conversation to flow naturally and between the children, we formed small groups of at least 3 and a maximum of 5 children of a similar age group. In this way and in accordance with research ethics, the situation allowed

⁵Results of these first studies are published in Lani-Bayle and Passeggi (2014).

respecting the child's point of view and their ways of narrating the world ⁶. The research corpus is made up of transcriptions of video-recorded sessions in schools and audio-recorded sessions in the case of hospitals.

The protocol comprises three moments. The *opening*, presentation of Alien; the *conversation in the circle*, which despite the short script, we let ourselves be influenced by what the children were saying; the *end of the conversation*, when we announced that the Alien was in a hurry to return to his planet to tell what he had learned from the children about the school and the hospital. If they wanted, they could send a message to the children on the Alien's planet. It was curious to see how much the children became attached to the Alien and didn't want him to go away. In hospitals and in the indigenous community, at the insistence of the children, the researchers provided reproductions of the Alien to assure them of the bonds they developed with him in conversation circles. The children's drawings and messages, whose richness one can imagine, were little analyzed due to the priority given to interaction with the researcher and between peers. At the application schools, they enthusiastically told us how they did research at school and that's why they wanted to participate in our research. Each researcher adapted their entry into the field in their own way. There were those who took advantage of the video recordings to immediately discuss with the team about the researcher's performance in the conversation circles. This critical reflection made it possible to improve the researcher's interaction with the children.

Following the research, the protocol was adapted according to the research situation, imagination and creativity, both of the project team in dissertations and theses that we supervised, but also by young researchers, in several universities, who invited us to their theses and dissertation defense committees. The protocol was widely publicized by the team's scientific production and received an award, in 2015, from the Ibero-American Congress of Qualitative Research (CIAIQ). Thus, Alien transformed into Joaquim, a child from another EMEI, into a teacher with wings and antennas, coming from another planet, with characters in lab coats and glasses in hospitals and schools. However, he also grew in size to sit with the children and talk to them. In hospital classes, due to asepsis requirements, Alien was generally made of washable material to avoid contamination. Some researchers included drawings in the

⁶The project followed the regular procedures for approval by the Research Ethics Committee: school consent, image authorization, parental consent (TCLE), children's assent, prior contacts to get to know them, with the aim of creating an environment favorable to subsequent interactions. (Opinion of the Ethics Committee – 168.818 HUOL-UFRN, 11/23/2012, CAAE 06433412.3.000.5292).

surveys, others suggested that children accompany Alien on a tour of the school to photograph the spaces they liked most, or even distributed small recorders so that they could interview whoever they wanted. Some children interviewed Alien, their peers and the researcher herself. These devices allowed children to speak to each other spontaneously, without always having to refer directly to the adults participating in the research.

As researchers, the make-believe situation also helped us interact with the children, enabling us to become children again, by assuming a childish ⁷*persona*, as the researcher's place, in the conversation circle, was also to lend her voice to the Alien, so that the children could talk to him and think together about what the school was, what it was for, what was done there... As actors in the Greek theater, we supported ourselves in the mediation of the little extraterrestrial to also dialogue with the sleeping child within us, and who guided us in interacting with the other children in the conversation circle. The researcher's role was also to lend her voice to the Alien, and in this way the children helped us to dialogue with them and to think together about the school that we wanted to know through their eyes. Breton (2023) endorses our choice by stating that experiences, to be transformed into language, need an environment conducive to such performance.

Its passage into language, its expression in words and its integration into narratives, within the scope of narrative research, must be monitored by the researcher who, for this purpose, structures devices, establishes agreements to ask questions, regulates the levels of implication and specifies the procedures guidance he uses (BRETON, 2023, p. 14, our translation).

For these spaces to multiply in dialogue with children, parity with adults is necessary, which means that both will learn to position themselves between knowing and not knowing, in a situation of dialogue. For Lewkowicz (2008), the adult and child involved in a situational relationship, in which codes are established together, makes it possible to think the unthinkable, to include what is commonly left aside. The children introduced situations that were naturalized in schools into the conversation circles and which they reflected on when talking to the Alien. How they perceived the punishments and screams that occur in the classrooms, the violence in their neighborhoods, at school, against the school and from the school itself against them. The conversation circle fulfilled this delicate and challenging function of this space “between” the child and the school, the child and the hospital, the child and the teacher. Children's narrative reflexivity emerges in this unhindered, facilitating joint reflection, allowing them to narrate,

⁷Mask that the ancient Greeks used in plays to represent characters.

evaluate and prioritize their feelings and emotions. Finally, what no one can do for them in order to occupy their place of speech as a subject with the right to be heard, but also the place of someone who can teach adults and not just learn from them.

We were able to get in touch not only with what the children thought, but also with what we were able to think, together, as a result of this human disposition to narrative reflexivity, sharpened by the receptivity of others and what was happening between us. Delory-Momberger (2012, p. 527-528, our translation) helps us understand this attitude of sensitive listening.

Everything changes when the *narrator* (who is no longer a *questioner*) has the *project of allowing the space of the narrator's speech and forms of existence* to expand in the broadest and most open way possible, when he puts himself in the position of "following the actors". The canonical and almost ontological order of the *antecedent question and the consecutive answer* can then only be *inverted*.

So, the best thing about dialogue is neither the question nor the answer, but the space it creates *between* what we know and what we can know with the other, about the other, with ourselves and about ourselves in the act of joint reflection. The triadic interaction – children-Alien-researcher - in the conversation circle encouraged children to go beyond ready-made answers, which close or impede the flow of the narrative, creating twists and turns. As the dialogue flowed between us, the doors of access to what was happening in the outside world and what was happening to us inside our inner world were opened.

Thus, we learned from them that it is necessary to know how to never get ahead, showing the children the way to go, nor to stay behind without catching up with the children walking in front of us. By walking *with* them, we learned to awaken the child narrator in us and, at the same time, to listen to the child narrator who lives within them. And in dialogue with them we live the poetic experience of linking two worlds, that of childhood and that of adults, through the power of imagination and creativity that make narrative the common place of human existence and its countless journeys.

Possible considerations moving forward

There is within the human soul, the permanence of a core of childhood, a childhood that is immobile, but always alive, alien to history, hidden from others, disguised as a story when told, but which has its true reality only in the moments of its enlightenment, the which is the same as saying in the moments of his poetic existence.

(Gaston Bachelard, 1999, p. 46, our translation).

Things don't communicate, they don't tell their story. This is not what happens with men, who are historical beings, capable of autobiography.
(Paulo Freire, 1983, p. 33, our translation).

We began this text by emphasizing the interest we had in presenting a reflection on the methodology of research with children, taking as a basis our concerns and learning, as researchers, over the last eleven years, seeking to understand with them their ways of narrating and giving meaning to the world in which they are located, what they do or cannot do in it. For Fernández (2001, p. 55), the theorization that emanates from research is always related to our ability to go beyond what has already been thought, so that all authorial knowledge is produced in a place where creativity and play enhance the constitution of subjectivities, which are produced, intertwining objectivity and subjectivity, experiences and meanings, certainties and doubts, thoughts and feelings, in addition to the dichotomies that paralyze and do not allow dialogue with ideas and people, called the space of “in between”. In which the interaction develops *between* natural people who get involved in it, recognize each other and validate their words by sharing narratives.

Bachelard (1999, p. 46, our translation) states, in the excerpt above, we harbor in our soul the permanence of “an immobile childhood”, which we hide from others and which reveals itself “only in moments of enlightenment”, which makes us singular and universal. We learned from children, during the research, that when we let the child in us die, we suffer without it from the absence of our imagination capacity to (re)create the fantastic refuge of our poetic existence. And wouldn't it be precisely this existence permeated with poetry that would allow us to find ways to research and be with children at school?

In our journey *with* the children, from the perspective of dialogical and educational research, they showed us, very clearly, a paradox that affects us, throughout the schooling process: the denial of the constitution of our poetic existence, of our humanity, of our authenticity in adult life. There is a contrast between the perception of children in the schools investigated in relation to that of hospitalized children. If the first ones carry the most prohibitive marks, because for the Alien “to stay at school you will need to cut your wings, because at school you are not supposed to fly [...] you have to stay quiet and study so as not to disturb the children, which the children are thinking! We learned from hospital classes another perception of school. Hospital classes, more focused on the importance of the body in all its fragility, bring hope to children. And those little bodies of children who feel subjected to invasive treatments are capable of saying “but it's for our good”. “Alien, they say, you need to

have a hospital on your planet!” “And teachers too!” “Many games!”. They realize the importance of preserving childhood through play as a potential to overcome the pain of illness, compulsory hospitalization, ruptures with family, school and friends. For this reason, hospital classes as space-time in favor of the pain release process are the place of hope to “be happy again”.

In turn, children who attend regular schools realize, from the time they transition from Early Childhood Education to Elementary School, that they are losing their right to playfulness, creativity... So, what is the reason for considering playfulness, imagination, creativity as opposed to critical reflexivity? As waste to be thrown out the window of oblivion? And with this gradual loss, the authorization to create, without fear, “fantastic worlds”, as Bachelard tells us in the epigraph above. School, by privileging spaces and times destined to develop the student's craft, allows a tension to be established between learning and playing, and between duty and pleasure, which leads children to give up their childhood, and their own lives and even become uncomfortable with the knowledge provided by the school, which will affect them throughout their lives.

As Freire (1983, p. 33, our translation) states, the difference between things and humans is that humans tell their stories, and from a young age “are capable of autobiography”. And if that wasn't enough, they reworked several autobiographies throughout their lives. At school, children write two autobiographies. A “school autobiography”, along the lines of school, repeating what adults think of school: They are there to learn and (con)train themselves. But, on the back of the page, they write another autobiography, rooted in the life they preserve at school, marked by freedom and imagination, as a tactic to keep with them and remain children. For Michel de Certeau (1999, p. 104, our translation), tactics are the “skillful gestures of the 'weak' in the order established by the 'strong', the art of striking in the other's field, the cunning of hunters, mobilities in maneuvers, polymorphic operations, joyful, poetic and warlike finds.” This parallel, “censored” story that we keep inside our soul, inside our inner world, is what they will tell later. As a counterpoint to the constitution of their school *ethos*, their poetic *ethos* emerges, which helped them and continues to help them become who they are.

This autobiography written on the back showed us that children like to learn, but not always in the way adults like to teach, as schooling gradually frays the bonds between playfulness and the body, imagination and creativity and the soul, narration to the constitution of oneself. And, in their enculturation process, with their rituals and speeches, they tie childhood to their bonds. As we said previously, in their narratives, they weave autobiographies in the

formal school model, without ever saying what they learn, what their silent tactics teach them in the art of remaining children, forming friendships, living with others, putting to use their reflection in the games between them and in the power games they experience in their games, in the reinvention of school spaces, movements in which they reinvent themselves by reinventing the time they spend at school.

We were able to observe that the spaces for children to be included in school institutions, as a rule, are designed by adults, guided by beliefs and representations they have about children and education, and not exactly based on children's needs and perceptions. This becomes visible when they are encouraged to highlight which school spaces attract them most and the classroom is not mentioned. They like the playgrounds, the courtyards, the courts, the computer labs, where playing and interacting with peers is allowed.

Situations like these help us answer the insistent question: why privilege children's narratives as a research instrument? Because the study of narratives produced by children about their daily experiences becomes a precious tool for accessing the constructions they make about what is happening in their lives and that we adults have forgotten or do not want to remember. However, it is through narration that we all construct ourselves as subjects, which is why narratives allow us to get closer to the child's subjectivity and all the complexity of this process in childhood. For this reason, we learn that when children live in these places, between the world of adults and childhood, between health and illness, the experience of being listened to opens up an unprecedented space for them in which they can (re)elaborate what they experienced and project themselves into the immediate future to give them meaning to what they are experiencing. In this way, (auto)biographical research that adopts a dialogical perspective with children goes beyond purely academic purposes, related to the production of scientific knowledge, often more concerned with instrumentalist techniques than with ethics and learning that helps the constitution of intersubjectivities that transform into the action of narrating and reflecting on what they have experienced, will experience, or have stopped living.

After all, over these many years, we realized that something really important was missing in the initial question that led us here: *What do children say about school (or hospital classes) is worthy of interest for educational research, training teaching and public policies aimed at childhood?* The question that over the last eleven years has become the thesis we defend today needs to be reformulated: *Is what children say about school (or hospital classes) worthy of interest for the children themselves and for those who research?* And only then can

we ask: *for teacher training and public policies aimed at childhood*. With children we learn a radical ethical principle:

Research with life narratives serves, primarily, the lives of those who narrate and those who research, through learning (identity, existential, professional, among many others), constructed together. If it serves their lives, it serves the production of scientific knowledge, rooted in human lives, capable of producing responses closer to their needs. Finally, it serves the social issues that justify the research. Any inversion in this order puts at risk the benefits of this ethical principle that must not be neglected (PASSEGGI, 2023, p. 203, our translation).

These are clues highlighted by the children's reflection. They show us how far we are, in our research, from delving deeper into what is latent in their speeches, their gestures, their silences. And we still have a lot to learn from them.

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