

Education, culture, and aesthetics in early childhood: Amares Project, in Cologne, Germany

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Abstract

There are several ways of resisting and this article presents one of them. In Germany, education is not free from current offensives: a) measurability of teaching quality; b) curricular optimization and effectiveness; c) development of methods through pedagogical skills; d) use of digital media in childhood; and e) early literacy to meet market needs. In the opposite direction to these proposals, the objectives of this article are: a) to discuss the importance of cultural and aesthetic education in early childhood; and b) to show that seeking innovative paths is a way of resisting the subordination of education to economic dictates. Thus, this article presents: a) the theoretical bases on cultural and aesthetic education; b) a practical example, the Amares Project, in Cologne, Germany, which shows how cultural and aesthetic education can be put into practice in early childhood; and c) the need to create educational strategies to resist current hegemonic proposals. When we turn our attention both to the social and cultural memory sedimented over the centuries and a responsible pedagogical practice, we enable a comprehensive education for human beings. This is a resistance strategy aimed at educating happy, conscious, and responsible children for life.

Key words childhood; education; culture; aesthetics; pedagogical practice.

Educação, cultura e estética na primeira infância: Projeto Amares, em Colônia, Alemanha

Resumo

Há várias formas de resistência e este artigo apresenta uma delas. Na Alemanha, a educação não está livre de ofensivas da atualidade: a) a mensurabilidade da qualidade de ensino; b) a otimização e a eficácia curricular; c) o desenvolvimento de métodos por competências pedagógicas; d) o uso de mídias digitais na infância; e e) a alfabetização precoce para atender a demandas de mercado. No sentido inverso dessas propostas, os objetivos desse artigo são: a) discutir a importância da educação cultural e estética na primeira infância; e b) mostrar que trilhar caminhos inovadores é uma forma de resistência à subordinação da educação aos ditames econômicos. Assim, este artigo apresenta: a) as bases teóricas sobre educação cultural e estética; b) um exemplo prático, o Projeto Amares, em Colônia, Alemanha, que mostra como é possível realizar a educação cultural e estética na primeira infância; e c) a conclusão aponta a necessidade da criação de estratégias educacionais de resistência às atuais propostas hegemônicas. Ao voltar nossas atenções tanto à memória social e cultural sedimentada ao longo dos séculos quanto à prática pedagógica responsável, possibilitamos a formação integral do ser humano. Isso constitui uma estratégia de resistência para formar crianças felizes, conscientes e responsáveis para a vida.

Palavras-chave infância; educação; cultura; estética; prática pedagógica.

Educación, cultura y estética en la primera infancia: Proyecto Amares, en Colonia, Alemania

Resumen

Hay varias formas de resistencia y este artículo presenta una de ellas. En Alemania, la educación no está libre de ofensivas de la actualidad: a) la medición de la calidad de enseñanza; b) la optimización y la eficacia curricular; c) el desarrollo de métodos por competencias pedagógicas; d) el uso de medios digitales en la infancia; y e) la alfabetización precoz para atender las demandas de mercado. En la dirección opuesta a estas propuestas, los objetivos de este artículo son: a) discutir la importancia de la educación cultural y estética en la primera infancia; y b) mostrar que buscar caminos innovadores es una forma de resistencia a la subordinación de la educación a los dictámenes económicos. Así, este artículo presenta: a) las bases teóricas sobre educación cultural y estética; b) un ejemplo práctico, el Proyecto Amares, en Colonia, Alemania, que muestra cómo la educación cultural y estética puede ponerse en práctica en la primera infancia; y c) la necesidad de la creación de estrategias educativas de resistencia a las actuales propuestas hegemónicas. Cuando dirigimos nuestra atención tanto a la memoria social y cultural sedimentada a lo largo de los siglos cuanto a una práctica pedagógica responsable, posibilitamos una formación integral del ser humano. Esto constituye una estrategia de resistencia para formar niños felices, conscientes y responsables de la vida.

Palabras clave infancia; educación; cultura; estética; práctica pedagógica.

Education, culture et esthétique dans la petite enfance: Projet Amares, à Cologne, Allemagne

Résumé

Il existe plusieurs formes de résistance et cet article en présente une. En Allemagne, l'éducation n'est pas exempt des offensives actuelles: a) de la mesurabilité de la qualité de l'enseignement; b) de l'optimisation et l'efficacité du programme; c) de le développement de méthodes par compétences pédagogiques; d) de l'utilisation des médias numériques dans l'enfance; et e) de l'alphabétisation précoce pour répondre aux demandes du marché. Dans le sens opposé de ces propositions, les objectifs de cet article sont les suivants: a) discuter l'importance de l'éducation culturelle et esthétique dans la petite enfance; et b) montrer que les méthodes novatrices constituent une forme de résistance à la subordination de l'éducation aux impératifs économiques. Ainsi, cet article présente: a) les bases théoriques de l'éducation culturelle et esthétique; b) un exemple concret, le Projet Amares, à Cologne, Allemagne, qui montre comment l'éducation culturelle et esthétique peut être réalisée dans la petite enfance; et c) la nécessité de créer des stratégies éducatives pour résister aux propositions hégémoniques actuelles. Lorsque nous portons notre attention à la fois sur la mémoire sociale et culturelle accumulée au fil des siècles et sur une pratique pédagogique responsable, nous permettons une formation intégrale de l'être humain. C'est une stratégie de résistance pour éduquer des enfants heureux, conscients et responsables pour la vie.

Mots-clés enfance; education; culture; esthétique; pratique pédagogique.

Introduction

In Germany, the path of struggle for Early Childhood Education has had effects on pedagogical discussions, on professional qualification of functional staff, on increased institutional service, and on seeking social recognition for professionals who work in this area. This country is not free from the ever stronger requirements of optimization and effectiveness of Early Childhood Education. Productivity is planned through statistically measurable and comparable results to enable education control by the agencies in charge of it. From this perspective and with this intent, children are deprived of their present and past time as they are programmatically launched into the future. Thus, the time for being a child is reduced, the importance of plays and playing is devalued, and efforts are focused on mimetic transfer of instructions and contents. According to this conception, children should be prepared, from a very early age, for the next schooling stages, in order to ensure the best performance possible in the future labor market.

The recrudescence of conservative offensives has sought, among other actions, to impose methods and programs to optimize results, to hinder the plurality of conceptions in pedagogical work, and to restrict the institutions' autonomy and freedom of expression in the exercise of professional pedagogical activity. This offensive is expressed, for instance, when playing is instrumentalized, above all as a teaching resource for working with content. This model of understanding such an important, delicate, and sensitive phase as early childhood needs to be put into question and reviewed. Recognizing the numerous

children's languages, it is understood that they are, *de facto et de jure*, people of *today*, the *now*, the *present*. There is an urgent need to create strategies of resistance to proposals of subordinating Early Childhood Education to the economic model.

Playing is a legitimate social practice of children that enables great interaction and learning between themselves and between them and adults. By playing, children have the opportunity to get to know the world, to get along with other children and adults, and to take on the world culturally. It is by playing that we learn reality and how to live life. Children's play provides a child with opportunities to situate her/himself in the world, choosing what, with whom, and how to play. Thus, a child needs time to experience, interact, fantasize, assign meaning to her/his experiences, unfold her/his emotions, grasp the diversities of real life. According to Vigotski (2000, p. 67, our translation), "the actual movement of the child development process does not take place from individual to socialized experience, but from social to individual experience." And this process takes time so that the exchanges that enable knowledge are built in a relational process.

This article aims to point out, by means of a practical example, a way of resisting the offensives to restrict the autonomy of professional pedagogical activity in early childhood. We do not claim that the example presented herein is the best, that it is a model or that it is more pedagogically suitable than other possible strategies. Our purpose is to show some initiatives that are innovative and feasible. The first part of the article brings brief considerations about the theoretical framework that underlies our understanding of the child as a cultural and aesthetic being. It is from this viewpoint that we discuss the role of education and alternative proposals that, since the 20th century, have grounded the search for new paths to follow. In the second part, we introduce an Early Childhood Education project that is resistant to current proposals for children: the Kindergarten in nature Amares, in Cologne, Germany. Having a community project as a basis, we show the importance of participatory action among children and adults and the appreciation of children in the activities of this institution. In the end, we make brief considerations about pedagogical accountability and the importance of culture and aesthetics in early childhood.

Theoretical framework

Early childhood and the importance of cultural and aesthetic education

Human beings are constituted by means of a complex process. We are, at the same time, similar concerning the human species and different regarding our way of being, acting, and thinking, something which can vary historically, geographically, and culturally. Undoubtedly, we may claim that each human being is unique and special and that such uniqueness of being is inherent to human diversity in all spheres and dimensions of our daily

life. Being able to interact with one another, exercise the tolerance needed in interpersonal relationships, and learn to look at each other with empathy are major challenges in contemporary societies. So,

[...] the goal of education is, on the one hand, identifying the cultural elements that need to be assimilated by individuals of the human species so that they become human and, on the other hand, simultaneously, discovering the most suitable ways to achieve those objectives (Saviani, 2010, p. 17, our translation).

Unlike an adult, a child's world is always new, situated in the present and without previous references. A newborn child, for instance, is totally occupied noticing the world around her/him, discovering patterns that repeat, which she/he recognizes gradually and in which she/he begins to trust. Since the world is totally new and it cannot be explained to the newborn baby, she/he needs to use and incessantly improve her/his senses to be, to play a role, and to grasp the world around her/him. Thus, the child widens, step by step, her/his new experiences, achievements, discoveries, emotions, and her/his new fields of mastery. Every child is born and grows in a sociocultural context. More than in any other life phase, the child is constantly faced with unprecedented situations and she/he learns how to deal with them gradually.

Sensory perception is the gateway to our experiences as human beings. It has to be culturally developed, learned, and differentiated. We are curious and it is through such perceptions – first with the mouth, then with the eyes, the nose, the ears, and the hands – that we learn to live, because a child can only feel, know, and think of what she/he realizes. At birth, the child arrives at a world that already existed before her/him. And this culturally shaped world acts upon each of us as a second nature.

Children experience the world through their first activities and they are completely occupied capturing and grasping the world around them, reproducing the patterns they can capture through their senses, playing with such patterns, fantasizing, feeling, and creating new shapes. The child grows in a cultural context and her/his personal education is intended to be part of this sociocultural context, no matter whatever it is and wherever it happens. Culture, as human production, product, and activity that generates a proper way of knowing, grasping, and acting in the world, allows us to establish relationships with others and recognize ourselves as a part of a historical and social reality. We are part of a sociocultural context, but we are not just a social product. We are, both children and adults, active producers of this context.

Thus, the basis and starting point of any human being for existing in the world are found in developing sensory activities, that is, aesthetic activities – which interconnect

culture, seen herein in the broad sense of a web of socially constructed meanings (Geertz, 1996), to individualities, in order to create representations, emotions, and senses that are our own.

Aisthesis – its Greek semantic root – is, among the various meanings for the word aesthetics, that which designates it as knowledge through the senses. This meaning achieves a more comprehensive understanding of this term, relating aesthetics not only to art, but also to lived experience (Alvares, 2010, p. 46, our translation).

In her/his early years of life, a child does not learn through lessons, classes, teachings, or instructions. A child learns and is educated by curiosity, imitation, and emulation through her/his own experiences in everyday situations. Therefore, the only way that enable us to build new knowledge with children is by providing them with opportunities to interact having time, independence, and autonomy – and these occasions of participation and personal/social involvement should be conceived in the most responsible and professional way in professional and human terms.

In the German language, people distinguish between *Erziehung* and *Bildung*. Both words may be translated into Portuguese as *education*. However, these words do not mean the same thing.

Erziehung refers to the intergenerational, asymmetric, and intentional relationship of conveying values, beliefs, and knowledge, for instance, in the relationship between parents and children and between educators and learners. In this sense, *Erziehung* is a social reaction to development and the children's primary needs, socially defined in order to socialize them in a given context (Schäfer, 2014). The newborn universal being begins to specialize, little by little, months after her/his birth. In all human societies there is certain consensus that can vary, for instance, in various social segments or classes, as well as culture for culture, about what is important in children's education, what a child is, and/or how to deal with a child.

In turn, the concept of *Bildung* refers to education in the sense of a human being's self-education and self-transformation in her/his relation to her/himself and to the world. *Bildung* is defined as the individual self-development process that accompanies a person's life, in which she/he improves her/his intellectual, cultural, and practical abilities, as well as her/his personal and social skills. So, *Bildung* is something that the person must do by her/himself, but this only materializes in the debate and struggle with the socio-cultural world and has to do with the subjective way of dealing with and counterbalancing aspirations and possibilities. The achievement of autonomy and personal knowledge are central aspects of the concept of *Bildung* (Zirfas, 2018).

One of the pioneers of the idea of *Bildung* in early childhood was the German pedagogue Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852), disciple of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), who, strongly influenced by the ideas of Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), advocated a school education centered on the child's natural development, that is, from the inside out, in an environment of affection and love, similar to that of a home (Zirfas, 2018). Pestalozzi's educational principles were grounded in the perspective that we must work on the three human dimensions, defined by him as: a) head (intellect); b) hand (practice, work); and c) heart (affectivity). Fröbel argued that public Kindergarten was not a deposit of poor children in need of institutional assistance due to their social status of misery, but an institution where *Bildung* could occur through pedagogical practices. In his main work, *A educação do homem* [The education of man], originally published in 1826, Fröbel (1982) assigned great value to the experiences of doing, using his hands, and employing the plastic expression. Fröbel was the first German educator to use plays and playing as activities and pedagogical resources. When thinking about games and plays as pedagogical resources and indispensable elements for children's development, he devised a method and a didactic material of his own. In line with his conception of *Bildung*, Fröbel gave great autonomy to the child, although he had some controversial didactic ideas. Thus, on the one hand, he assigns children gifts of their own to explore the world through children's plays. On the other hand, his didactic conceptions bring elements of a teaching-learning relationship through imitation (Heiland, 1991).

Fröbel greatly contributed to the pedagogical discussion of Early Childhood Education and many of his ideas are significant until today: a) the importance of pedagogical work in early childhood; b) pedagogical materials and the ways of children's plays that introduce sensorial and conceptual notions about the body itself, as well as mathematical, linguistic, and spiritual perceptions of the world around the child; and c) the importance of independent actions taken by children in their self-education, incorporating them into a larger cosmic model. In addition, Fröbel assigned strong emphasis to interpersonal relationships in pedagogical practice, which favor and improve the child's educational process.

Giving continuity to Fröbel's ideas, for more than a century, thinkers such as Maria Montessori (1870-1952), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), and Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), among others, put into question the way of educating. These pedagogical models seek to situate the child as the center of education and as an active person in the construction of her learning and self (trans) formation process. In all of these models, it is up to the educator observing the interests and needs of each child and preparing spaces and routines and supporting projects in accordance with these observations (Zirfas, 2018).

The line proposed by the Italian physician Maria Montessori was among the first ones to insert affective issues in education. Montessori has devised a scientific theory of child development with a new pedagogical proposal. She argued that the appropriate

environment for Early Childhood Education needs to be rich in materials that arouse interest in the activity and invite the child to carry out her/his own experiences in an autonomous and responsible way. In Montessori's pedagogy, child development and concentration in an activity take place through the manipulation of objects, which must be at the height of children's hands, and the teacher is considered a guide for learning.

The Waldorf Pedagogy was created with the ideas of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner as a basis and it has this name because its first students were children of employees of the German factory Waldorf Astoria. Steiner proposes an education based on the search for the essence of human beings through creativity, art, music, movement, and respect for life cycles.

Such pedagogy believes that learning must go hand in hand with physical, aesthetic, and artistic activities, to work on the child's physical, social, and individual development in an interconnected way through activities such as gardening, theater, eurythmy, gymnastics, mosaic, and carpentry. Fairy tales, stories, and children's songs play a major educational role in the design of Waldorf kindergartens. The proposal seeks to appreciate individual potentialities, social integration between institution and family, imagination, creativity, art, and problem-solving skills.

Childhood is highly valued in the precepts of the *Listening Pedagogy, or Pedagogy of the Senses*, as we see in some translations of the educational experience in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italia, where Loris Malaguzzi grounded his work in major axes, such as Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics. A very important feature of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is that children have skills, potentials, and interest in building their own learning and that they have multiple languages and must use all of them in their learning process. The metaphor 'the one hundred languages of a child' expresses this concept very well – such languages are understood as availabilities that change and multiply through the relationships established between peers and along with adults. In this approach, the space-environment is also an educator: the institutional space-environment is regarded as a living body in constant transformation, a place where both children and their family members and educators learn from each other and collaborate in decision making, thus, knowledge is acquired through experimentation.

The pedagogical experience of Reggio Emilia is a story that has spanned more than forty years and it may be described as a pedagogical experiment in an entire community. As such, it is unique; as far as we know, there has never been anything like this before (Rinaldi, 2014, p. 23, our translation).

Pedagogical listening is a key element in the educational process, constituting an indispensable condition for dialogue and for the transformation process. Listening and observation are regarded by educators from Reggio Emilia as a permanent reflection process, therefore, they are appreciated and routinely converted into educational documentation. Routines unfold according to what interests and motivates children, then they are converted into projects. When a child asks something, instead of giving a ready-made answer, she/he is motivated to investigate and find answers, something which triggers a project with one or more children and creates activities in the various ateliers of the pedagogical institution. Child development is documented in individual portfolios. Reggio Emilia's approach is constantly changing because the education project that it proposes is based on relationship, participation, and communication network involving children, teachers, and parents. Consequently, its work is thoughtful, constantly rethinking and rebuilding itself.

Amares: the Kindergarten in nature

Information, data, experiences, and photos of the Kindergarten Amares, introduced and discussed below, were collected during a technical visit held on December 7, 2018, as a part of the academic mobility activities of a Brazilian guest along with the author and another professor from the University of Cologne, Germany. We arrived at 8:00 a.m. for this technical visit, on a cold, rainy winter day, with plenty of traffic on the famous *autobahns* (high speed lanes) and many cars vying for parking spaces on the streets. The City of Cologne was already awakened. The noise of passers-by, cars, and streetcars left no doubt that we were in a large German city. We set the meeting on Dürenerstrasse Street, right at the city entrance, going towards the university. We were happy, because it was a relevant opportunity to experience the pedagogical practice.

We walked between urban buildings in a residential complex with functional architecture, typical of post-war Cologne, low-rise, sparsely-colored apartment buildings, but wooded areas, with grass and shrubs between buildings. We did not walk much, perhaps 100 or 200 m, and shortly after the buildings a grove of thick, dense trees opened up, a wet soil smell hung in the air and low vegetation invited us to tread new paths. We were entering the pompous Stadtwald Park, the urban forest of Cologne. We noticed that the noise of this restless city ceased, we heard nothing but nature, the wind in the leaves and the birds that remained after the seasonal migrations in December. About 100 m into the woods, we saw a blue industrial gate that seemed to be apart from the scene in front of us. We had arrived at the institution, the so-called *garden in nature*. We were warmly welcomed by Professor V. from the Amares Project. The report below was collected during the technical visit. Due to ethical concerns, we omit the names.

The history of this institution is linked to many people and places that happened to meet in Cologne. A group of Ph.D. students in education made an academic excursion to Reggio Emilia, in 2006, to know an institution awarded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This contact between professors and Ph.D. students was crowned by philosophical discussions, during a breakfast, about: Loris Malaguzzi; Janusz Korczak; Maria Montessori; Rudolf Steiner; François Dolto; Henning Köhler; Ursula Stenger; and Gerd Schäfer. In the face of intense discussions about pedagogues, philosophers, and Early Childhood Education teachers, a friendship was born between participants. More than that, as reported by Professor V.:

There was a wish and a desire in the air to put into practice a new pedagogy.

Back in Cologne, she continued:

The feeling of friendship and the search for new knowledge led to new discussions and pedagogical talks.

The experience with the Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia pedagogies was the starting point of something new, open, and indeterminate: the Amares garden in nature.

According to Professor V., this name is, at the same time, simple and complex:

[...] the word 'amares' comes from the Spanish language and it has been inspired by Eduardo Galeano. Amares contains a word play: the sea, there is sea, the plural of sea in Spanish is 'mares,' 'hay mares.' This idea pushes us into the immensity and depth of the waters and into the fluid flows of all human life on the planet. The word 'Amares' also contains the verb 'amar' and its poetic plural 'amares,' that is, the richness and multiplicity of the numerous forms of love.

In 2006, Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup. The pedagogues V. and P., along with friends and collaborators, began to seek an urban space to create a Kindergarten in nature that they had designed. In December of the same year, they found a warehouse of machines, with sheds lost in the middle of the urban Stadtwald Park, taken by garbage and vegetation. They leased the property, which belongs to the City of Cologne; 12 young people from 3 continents helped cleaning up the spaces in a collaborative work initiative. After this collective cleaning-up effort, the "Open Door Day" was held, selling sausages and

drinks to raise funds. According to Professor V., they managed to raise about € 200 on that day. Friends and family members collaborate with € 11 thousand, other people have pledged to collaborate with a monthly quota ranging from € 5 to 50 over 5 years. Even before this year's end, Amares began its pedagogical activities with 4 children, then 10 children enrolled, and so on. In mid-2007, Amares was officially recognized by the state education department as an independent educational institution. After this recognition, the institution obtained some funding for renovation and sanitation of its facilities. Despite government support, which covers around 90% of the institution's expenses, parents contribute on a monthly basis to the Kindergarten. Today, Amares has two headquarters in Cologne.

It is hard to report the feeling of embracement and freedom that we feel when experiencing *in loco* the pedagogical activities in Amares. To do this, I use photographs to show a feasible pedagogical resistance strategy. Due to ethical principles, to preserve their anonymity, we avoid taking pictures of children's faces.

The Kindergarten in nature: Amares

Figure 1 Indoor and outdoor areas of the kindergarten



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Amares sees itself institutionally as a place for cultural and aesthetic education, as a space for the meeting between children and adults. The institution defines itself as a social workshop, where children and adults shape each other, where the new happens and what already existed is recognized and addressed. It is also a place where what has been forgotten can be rediscovered. Nature, art, workshops, and ateliers are seen as relational scenarios of trust and joint actions, of dialogue and collaboration, of individuality and community, where children and adults participate by building biographies.

Figure 2 The yard and the workshops



Source: Authors' personal collection.

On December 7, 2018, the day of the technical visit, children and adults met on the outside yard, despite the cold and rainy weather. The floor is made of mud beaten by everyone's footsteps. The old warehouses were turned into ateliers, which constantly change their activity and function. Children from 1 year of age, since they already walk, can participate in daily activities in the Kindergarten Amares. The yard works as a space-educator and, for this purpose, it offers many possibilities for co-constructing a space on the move.

Affection, care, and mutual attention enable *Bildung*, i.e. self-education. The workshops and ateliers are constantly changing their goals and they serve as scenarios for creative processes. Work is always collaborative, based on participation and joint experience of adults and children.

Figure 3 Collaborative and community work



Source: Authors' personal collection.

These are spaces in which children can trace, experience, and know along with their body community life, nature, physical laws, and mathematics. They are scenarios of varied colors, shapes, materials, and sizes.

Figure 4 Interaction between children



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Children are free to make their choices and use time in activities that appeal to them. Or they just stand around watching other children, talking, feeling the texture of the leaves of a little plant. There, children have time to be children.

Figure 5 The importance of playing



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Playing with water, even in winter, shows to be a very enriching activity. Stirring the mud, feeling the smell of wet soil, mixing muddy water with a stick or the hands are important activities for child development. Being able to get dirty, cover clothes and shoes with clay, play with wooden stumps, build landscapes and new worlds with stones are enriching experiences. A yard suitable for children's activities does not require little plastic houses, an organized infrastructure with custom made toys. Interacting with nature opens room for imagination, for creativity, for building knowledge based on active individual and collective experiences. Children learn about shapes and textures without necessarily having to categorize them, outline them, or name them.

There are also indoor spaces, where reading takes place, as well as constructing with logical blocks, paintings, collages, and drawings; in there, children eat, sleep, celebrate parties. They can get in and out the internal and external spaces without asking for permission. They can stay in the institution for part-time or full-time. In addition to the many ateliers on the yard, there is a tent with books and instruments and several interconnected little rooms for playing, eating, sleeping, etc. Bathrooms are suited to children's size and those who want can rest in the dorm or sleep after lunch.

Figure 6 The internal rooms



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Seeing, hearing, smelling, observing, experiencing, touching, grabbing, and asking are major activities for child development. Experiencing with the hands, seeing the colors, awakening new questions, arousing the magic of new meetings, and being affected by the inspiring and exciting enthusiasm of a place that is, at the same time, source and storage of inspirations: Amares is an institution of knowledge, a living gallery, a place of mutual construction, a place of listening and support – where culture is alive and dynamic. On the day of our visit, we heard 4 different languages: a) German; b) Portuguese; c) Spanish; and d) English. Children from 3 continents (Africa, America, and Europe) learn how to interact without barriers or borders and to incorporate knowledge from many origins, creating something new – the possibility of knowing their stories and embracing their biographies.

Figure 7 Drum made of bowls, sticks, and pans, stage on boxes



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Next, to exemplify the workshops, we show the joint building of a community oven with children on the yard of the Kindergarten in nature Amares.

Community workshops

Why do we need a stuffed animal to build a clay oven?

In 2018, after the discovery of clay on the ground, children had the idea of digging and the pedagogues thought about using the available material in some way. It is worth noticing that this was not a preconceived idea. Some projects have been taking shape throughout the school year, they are constructed with active participation of children, teachers, and contributors who participate in the daily routine of the Kindergarten in nature Amares.

In this process, children from the Kindergarten Amares, preschoolers, had the idea of doing ‘archaeological excavations’: they were interested in dinosaurs and in knowing more about volcanoes and the beginning of the universe. The theme came from a small discovery on the yard and it took weeks and months of conversations and joint activities. A small prehistoric park with a landscape of dinosaurs and volcanoes was built in one of the several ateliers: the “Amares Natural History Museum.” The interest in prehistory was not a part of a curricular content; it has been shaped by children’s questions.

Figure 8 Workshop: Amares Natural History Museum
Landscapes with dinosaurs and volcano created by children



Source: Authors' personal collection.

In contact with nature, children act and react in many ways: some ask, some construct an object, others observe, others play with things they find, some silence, others sing, some look at shapes and functionalities, others enjoy leisure. After installing a small “Amares Natural History Museum” in one of the workshops, a new community project was born: building a clay oven.

In the week prior to the technical visit, the group of teachers, contributors, and children had manufactured wooden shapes to mold the clay bricks using the clay they found in the yard. Children participated actively in every step of the process.

The clay collected on the ground was placed in basins and, after being mixed with straw, it was packed in wood molds made by all. The bricks manufactured were allowed to air dry.

Figure 9 Workshop: Clay bricks



Source: Authors' personal collection.

The process of building a community oven took the whole morning. It was necessary to mix the extracted clay using the straw that the children and pedagogues cut with small round scissors. During our visit, the children were busy with varied activities. Some of them played soccer with an educator. Others were riding a child's tricycle. Some of them interacted with fellow students. Others were interested in the bricks. Many hands are needed to build a clay oven.

Something very peculiar caught our attention. Since the beginning of activities, a plush doll accompanies the process progress, it changes places, but it is always present. One of the Kindergarten children has put it at the core of the process.

Figure 10 Workshop: The oven and the plush doll



Source: Authors' personal collection.

Throughout the building of the community oven, the plush doll remained present. In this process, an exchange of knowledge was experienced by all the people involved: children began to notice the many geometric shapes, knowing the various textures that we find in nature. Concepts such as stone, clay, straw, liquid, pasty, hard, soft, light, dark, gray, beige, black are known during the learning process, which unfolds organically through the joint activity, without having to qualify or name explicitly what is happening.

Figure 11 Workshop: Community oven taking shape and the plush doll



Source: Authors' personal collection.

The plush doll came to have a symbolic nature. It represents the pedagogical affirmation of respect for the child who included it in the community oven's project. Building a clay oven is something that people learn culturally. However, such learning does not involve the ability to define, explain, reproduce certain content, or to represent or reproduce what has been learned, but to be touched by the event.

Final remarks

Throughout this article, we argue that educational institutions for early childhood should guarantee children time to be children and have access to the processes of appropriating the reality that surround them through practices that have interactions and children's plays as guiding axes.

We show and see children's play and the activities that took place during the technical visit to the Kindergarten in nature Amares, in Cologne, Germany, as an opportunity for children to build and experience cultural and aesthetic processes. These children share multiple moments with each other and with the adults involved. The projects unfold in the dialogical exchange between all the participants. There is mutual listening and shared involvement that inspire us. There is room for everyone involved to express ideas, interests, and decisions.

In being together, harmonious and sometimes conflicting situations are shared. Both situations are important for the process of learning and building their autonomy and individuality. By means of activities or projects, through children's play and choices, children and adults represent their thoughts, make decisions, make choices, negotiate strategies, activities, and materials that interest them. Also, we interpret our experience as a practice, where children feel valued, embraced to engage in feelings of autonomy, friendship, and belonging to the group. Such cultural and aesthetic experiences described herein show that children, in this pedagogical practice, become authors in the joint teaching and learning process. Some of the major factors in the construction of this pedagogical space are: a) time; b) responsibility; and c) freedom for personal choices. Learning takes place through organic interaction, acceptance of the other's choices, and respect for children's choices.

Children may participate in collective projects and also observe, do other things, or simply do nothing. There is no imposition of how a child should act. There is also no concern with mechanical learning, with content reproduction. Children learn why they participate. They learn because what they are doing interests them and inspires them, drives them as human beings. Thus, the role of educators turns to listening, reflection, and accountability towards the whole: they care for the individual cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth of each child present there.

The technical visit reported herein has shown that, in Early Childhood Education, children may experience educational processes far beyond what is provided for in the curricular guidelines and/or standards. The Kindergarten in nature Amares is an institution for resistance: it is a place to constructed shared knowledge and feelings, activities, games, plays, and ways to use objects in order to live childhood experiences, culture, and education for life.

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