

Understanding and perception of play by Early Childhood Education teachers on their return to classroom activities

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Abstract

The study seeks to reflect and understand play after the emergency distancing measures of the pandemic in Early Childhood Education. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two teachers from the city of Campinas/SP upon the return of in-person activities. To analyze and interpret the results, we used the content analysis technique. As a theoretical framework, we used Elenor Kunz's theory of "Play and move", which highlights play as a dialogical activity, inherent to the child's condition and, therefore, a fundamental part of children's cultures. To understand how the teachers perceived play, we present and discuss their professional trajectories; their understanding of the phenomenon of play; and their perceptions upon the return of in-person activities. As results, we highlight the understanding and perception of play as a potential way of acting on the world and representing the context of children's lives at that time.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education. Teachers. Child. Play.

O brincar compreendido e percebido por professoras da Educação Infantil no retorno das atividades presenciais

Resumo

Este estudo busca refletir e compreender o brincar após as medidas emergenciais de distanciamento da pandemia na Educação Infantil. Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa descritiva, realizamos entrevistas semiestruturadas com duas professoras da cidade de Campinas/SP. no retorno das atividades presenciais. Para a análise e interpretação dos resultados, recorreremos à técnica de análise de conteúdo. Como aporte teórico, utilizamos a teoria do "Brincar e se-movimentar", de Elenor Kunz, que destaca o brincar como uma atividade dialógica, inerente à condição da criança e, por isso, peça fundamental das culturas infantis. Para compreendermos como as professoras perceberam o brincar, apresentamos e

discutimos suas trajetórias profissionais, suas compreensões do fenômeno brincar e suas percepções no retorno presencial das atividades. Como resultados, destacamos a compreensão e percepção sobre o brincar como uma forma potencial de atuar sobre o mundo e de representar o contexto de vida das crianças naquele momento.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil. Docentes. Criança. Brincar.

1 Introdução

The aim of this article is to reflect on and understand children's play, as conceived by preschool teachers, after the restrictive measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with regard to the return of face-to-face activities. To do this, we base ourselves on the concept of play as a dialogical relationship between the child and the world, which manifests itself through human movement. There is no doubt that the sudden and severe restriction of play possibilities has significantly transformed the play cultures established in childhood.

It is therefore essential to understand how children are playing when they return to face-to-face activities, since the socio-cultural resignifications constructed and experienced during this period can provide teachers with an insight into the dimensions of the contextual impacts on play culture and, consequently, on their educational processes, especially in the face-to-face environment.

This got us thinking: how has the pandemic influenced the lives of young children? Also, how have the anxieties and anxieties of being at home impacted on the way children act on the world? And how has this been visible in educational spaces? In a context where children were not able to attend Early Childhood Education institutions, making the possibilities of socialization, friendship and learning about life unfeasible at that time, school became a longing in children's daily lives, especially in relation to their peers (Matos *et al.*, 2022).

Play is a universal right for children (UNICEF, 1959), as we believe that it is through play that children dialogue with the world, with others and with themselves (Kunz, 2017);

they interact and socialize with their peers and, consequently, (re)produce peer cultures that establish children's cultures (Corsaro, 2003; Sarmiento, 2004); it allows them to develop and place themselves in the world in a bodily way, and, in this dialogue, they come to mean the world, as well as understanding it in its condition of being, externalizing its vitality.

The study by Matos *et al.* (2022), which is one of the studies that sought to provide an overview of childhood during the pandemic, provoked us to reflect on the possible impacts of this type of context, in which children's rights were restricted:

In this context, children are, contradictorily, one of the social groups least directly affected by the disease, but on the other hand, one of the most affected in terms of their rights. These include the right to socialize with other children, in the exercise of collective life, which can have an impact on their development process, physical and mental health, as indicated by some studies already carried out, as well as warnings from public health bodies (Matos *et al.*, p. 92).

We must emphasize that we are still trying to measure the impact that the pandemic may have had on children's lives. In addition, the pandemic was just one of the crises that hit us at that time; currently, Rio Grande do Sul is facing another humanitarian crisis due to the floods, but we can list so many others - there are many, which directly or indirectly affect the daily lives of children, especially the poorest, who feel inequality more intensely.

We understand that play is the way in which children express their feelings, affections, desires, anxieties and habits. In this way, we bring as a theoretical contribution the concept of Play and Move (Kunz, 2017), which treats play as “the indispensable and vital need of the child”, since it is understood as the essence through which children perceive the world, since this will be their channel of communication and meaning (Kunz, Costa, 2017).

Despite this, the child is seen as an artist of a beautiful work of art, whose sensitivity and originality are difficult to understand by adult rationality, since play is original in its essence, as a pre-reflective act (Cunha, Kunz, 2017, p. 81). Therefore, play becomes a

central element in our discussion. When we consider the school environment as a welcoming space, especially for these children, what possible consequences can we identify in their daily lives from play?

There have been many studies on play and children during the pandemic, but studies that tell the story of the experience of teachers returning to classroom activities still deserve more in-depth study. To this end, collaborating teachers who work in Early Childhood Education, in the city of Campinas/SP, narrated their professional trajectories, their understanding of play and how it was perceived after returning to routines in Early Childhood Education schools.

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2 Methodology

This is a qualitative descriptive study, which aims to reflect on and understand the experiences and meanings of the participants in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach considers subjective aspects in their complexity and dynamism, using methods that make it possible to analyze these experiences and the participants' perceptions of social phenomena (Minayo, 2012).

In this study, we chose to use semi-structured interviews as a research tool, which, according to Minayo (2018), is a flexible collection technique that allows the interviewee greater freedom to talk about the topic, under the guidance of the researcher, who establishes guiding questions. In this case, the interviews were carried out with two teachers from nursery schools in Campinas/SP: one from the private sector, from a Montessori school, and the other from the Campinas/SP municipal network. In the hope of obtaining, through their perceptions, an understanding of play and how it manifested itself

after the return to face-to-face activities. For context, the interviews were conducted via Google Meet in May 2022¹.

The choice of teachers was intentional since, in addition to accessibility, they wanted to be heard. It is worth noting that both teachers work in Early Childhood Education, guiding children aged between 3 and 6. In this sense, they were selected because of their different backgrounds and networks, broadening and enriching the discussion with their different teaching knowledge on the subject of play.

As far as the theoretical discussion of the work is concerned, especially with regard to reflecting on the theme of play, we adopted, as announced above, a framework with an emphasis on the concept of human movement, Play and Move². This approach is based on the idea that it is through play that children establish a dialog with the world, with others and with themselves, above all through spontaneous play (Kunz, 2017).

In this process, children attribute meanings and understand objects, phenomena and the dynamics of the world, contributing to the production and reproduction of their cultures (Corsaro, 2011; Sarmiento, 2004). Ultimately, play reveals itself as a way in which children understand and position themselves in relation to the world (Machado, 2013). From this perspective, we recognize the importance of play in the educational process, especially because of its continuous interaction with the Culture of Movement, which encompasses the various ways in which human beings use their bodies, in other words, how they create and experience different techniques and forms.

In the school environment, particularly in Early Childhood Education institutions, interactions and play stand out as structuring elements of pedagogical practice. This stems from the recognition of play not “only” as a power for child development, but also as an

¹ Face-to-face activities were resumed in August of the previous year, in accordance with current health regulations (Prefeitura de Campinas, 2021). Despite temporary suspensions due to new outbreaks, classroom classes continued until the time of the interviews (G1, 2021).

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intrinsic part of the representation of this historical and rightful subject (Brasil, 2018). In addition, we used research that sought to study children during the pandemic, considering their life contexts, as well as data and aspects that could contextualize the influence of the pandemic on their lives (Silva *et al.*, 2022; Meirelles *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, it is from the dialogue about playing with teachers that we propose this study, organized as follows: 1) Introduction; 2) Methodology; 3) Research subjects, a stage in which we seek to understand who the teachers are and some aspects that involve their personal and professional trajectories, in other words, where this narrative about play comes from; 4) Understood play, where we list elements with which they define and formulate this phenomenon; and finally, 5) Perceived play, a section in which we discuss what the teachers observed in play after returning from face-to-face activities.

The data was analyzed using the logic of Content Analysis discussed by Gomes (2009), which allows us to explore and understand the structure and meaning of the content collected. In this sense, decoding the data involved a process of transforming the raw data into categories, established *a posteriori*, with units of registration and meaning, which made it possible to analyze, interpret and discuss them in the light of the literature.

The research project was accepted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of ESEF/UFPel, under CAAE No. 37874820.6.0000.5313. Once the project had been approved, the interviews were carried out after they had signed the Free and Informed Consent Form. The interviews were transcribed and validated by the collaborating teachers. We used flower names to keep the teachers anonymous.

3 Research subjects

The understanding and way in which this phenomenon was perceived by the teachers involves elements that constitute them as professionals. It is through this approach that we can get closer to their perspectives and subjectivities in relation to the phenomenon (Minayo, 2018). In addition to initial training, it is worth taking into account

Oliveira (2003), who points out that teachers' knowledge is constituted beyond the theory studied in their initial training, but also from their teaching work and the relationships that originate and consolidate from it.

Margarida initially graduated in Journalism and later in Pedagogy, an area she approached out of curiosity and decided to make it her main field of work. She later specialized in Sociology of Culture at Unicamp and continued her education with courses in alternative practices with children, such as meditation, compassionate classroom, socio-emotional learning, ethics, non-violent communication and Freinet pedagogy, the latter being the reason for her move from São Paulo to Campinas. After three years' experience in a school with Freinet pedagogy, she was approved for a public examination for the municipality, where she has worked for at least three years.

As for Rosa, her desire to work as a teacher was born out of her work as a classroom assistant for three years in a Montessori school. She then graduated in Pedagogy, took the Montessori pedagogy course and, after completing her internship at the same school where she worked as an assistant, she was hired as a teacher, a position she has held for five years.

We can see that the collaborators have built up and added to their knowledge with complementary courses in different theories and pedagogical approaches, in addition to their initial training. This has allowed them to broaden their understanding of children and the way their educational process takes place, as well as the role of play in this development. Nunes (2011) points out that play is fundamental to the child's education in both theories, although it is understood in different ways when related to its connection with teaching.

In the context of Montessori pedagogy, play is understood as an exploratory activity of experience and representation of practical life. Children play with the aim of learning about issues relating to their socio-cultural environment, and this takes place at school through a pedagogical context adapted for children (Nunes, 2011). This context is organized by the adult, but explored and experienced by the child, using materials

developed by Maria Montessori, designed to sharpen their sensory perceptions, under the indirect guidance of the teacher. Montessori emphasized play because she saw it as an essential activity for children's development, considering it a powerful means for exploration, allowing them to learn by experimenting and interacting with the environment around them.

On the other hand, in Freinet's pedagogy, play is seen as a kind of game-work, since it serves to satisfy children's individual and social needs, which are naturally initiated by the child (Nunes, 2011). The author values free expression and collective work, proposing that children actively participate in the organization of time, space and the knowledge they feel they need to learn. For Freinet, the direct participation of children is fundamental in organizing the school environment and defining learning activities, promoting a more participatory and collaborative environment. The author also points out that this approach promotes constant invention, creativity, stimulating the imagination and the appropriation of what the group has developed together, respecting the individuality of each one (Nunes, 2011).

Both Maria Montessori and Celestin Freinet value the importance of autonomy and play in pedagogical practice, seeking to integrate this activity into the teaching and learning process. While Montessori emphasizes the child's relationship with the objects of culture, as well as with the teaching materials they construct, Freinet values free expression and collective work, based on interest and group work. In this sense, play is considered a dynamic in the relationship between the child, the other and the environment.

Although the teachers have participated in a process of continuing education, especially exploring other pedagogical theories for early childhood education, it is important to note that these courses do not rigidly determine their approach or a "final" teaching knowledge. Instead, they contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of teaching practice with children. Complementing Oliveira (2003), cited above, Iza *et al.* (2014), in their study on the constitution of teacher identity, point out that it is made up of internal and external factors, and that this directly affects the way it is understood. The internal factors,

related to the knowledge and reflections of the experiences teachers have had throughout their careers, are decisive in the constitution of their identity and the perception of their teaching practice, since they reflect the continuous construction of professional knowledge, beliefs, values and adaptation to the demands and challenges of the educational context.

Although teacher identity and the knowledge that makes it up are in constant flux, we were able to relate these links that ran through their training. The next chapter will therefore look forward to a dialog between these initial elements and a discussion about play as a phenomenon to be understood.

4 Understood play

In this topic, we will look at the teachers' understanding of the phenomenon of play, in order to touch on elements so that we can later discuss how this play was perceived. As a brief overview, play, as understood by the teachers, is seen above all as a creative act by the child, a form of intervention in reality that gives meaning to and manages their way of life; and play that represents their daily lives, marked by representations and social phenomena.

In Ms. Margarida's case, play is understood above all as a creative way for children to intervene and deal with material reality:

“The child, from... this here [shows a roll of cardboard] in the child's hand becomes a pirate's sword! And the child will use it later as a snake, as a rope... it's impossible for us adults to see the same sword, right?” (Ms. Margarida).

This understanding is in line with Kunz and Costa (2017), who treat play as a creative act by children to intervene and deal with reality through subjective aspects such as imagination and fantasy, which, in this process, give meaning to the world.

Playing as a creative act, interpreted as recreating and/or resignifying objects through the lens of fantasy and play, this state or subjective space of creation, is in line

with what Machado (2013) describes as potential space. For the author, this space is a domain where the human creative impetus reigns, in which the child creates ways of dealing with and acting in reality in a polymorphous way. Cunha and Kunz (2017, p. 79) add that children's play is a work of art, since it encompasses the aesthetic sense of the essence of novelty and the child's creation, thus being “radically new and radically inaugural”.

Nunes (2011) explains that Freinet presented the importance of play mainly because it promoted broad experiences which, recalling the notion of “play-work”, could contribute to what he called “practical intelligence”. This practice makes it possible to overcome challenges in a creative, appropriate and safe way, as children play. Therefore, the experience of playing is fundamental to expanding creative aspects for practical intelligence, to the extent that children also (re)invent themselves in this task.

The teacher also emphasizes the importance of free play in her proposals and explains how this contributes to the children's dynamics in her class:

“Free play is very sensitive for me! It gives the child the opportunity... to self-manage that group, that game, that proposal, it's very precious! It's where the child can be, be the way they are in the world!” (Ms. Margarida).

By pointing out aspects of free play, the teacher also emphasizes other elements that present an understanding of this activity. She adds that free play is planned in sessions, in which the environment is organized for a specific period, with specific materials. In this sense, free play is placed in relation to the environment, which is organized and mediated by the teacher, especially in terms of conflicts, aids, access, among other factors.

Kunz and Costa (2017, p. 14), when discussing play as “the indispensable and vital need of the child”, point to spontaneity and freedom as central elements of the philosophical theory of human movement “Play and Move”. This is because it is in this state of freedom and in the intense experience of the present time that children reveal themselves in their

“being-in-the-world”, above all because they are not under pressure from adult expectations. It is in this freedom that children find the space, together with others, to (re)signify mundane aspects through their play.

Self-management and the way children organize their free play are also related to the social dynamics of peer cultures, which are present in children's cultures. Through these interactions, also through play, children establish a set of activities, routines, artifacts, values and concerns that correspond to their social group (Sarmiento, 2004; Corsaro, 2003). In fact, many times, when adults see “mess” in children's play and start to “organize” it, they end up subtracting or emptying the meaning constructed and attributed by the subjectivity of each child who took part in the play, as well as disqualifying the intersubjective charge of the group that organized and guided its internal logic.

Rosa points out another understanding of play, especially in relation to the representation of everyday life. As she points out:

“Play imitates life, right? We play with what really happens, the little house, dad, mom and the little son, the race, we play with the car, they play imitating life [...]”
(Ms. Rosa).

Although children (re)produce their cultures among peers, they are immersed in the culture of the adult world, where they end up reproducing habits, behaviors, social roles and other practices, in other words, the way the world is understood and produced by adults (Machado, 2013; Kunz, Costa, 2017). It is important to note that although they reproduce elements of adult culture through play, this does not happen passively. In this space of creation and interaction with other children, children also become agents for transforming the elements that make up social dynamics:

In their interaction with adults, children continually receive stimuli for social integration, in the form of beliefs, values, knowledge, dispositions and rules of conduct which, instead of being passively incorporated into knowledge, behaviors and attitudes, are transformed, generating children's judgments, interpretations and behaviors that contribute to the configuration and transformation of social forms (Sarmiento, 2009, p. 29).

Children are not merely recipients of a pre-established culture, which assigns them a place and a social role, but agents of transformation within that culture. They act both in the way they interpret and assimilate this culture and in the effects they generate through their own practices. An example of this can be seen in contemporary art, which significantly illustrates the impact of children's expressions integrated into the collective imagination (Sarmiento, 2009).

The reproduction of everyday life is in line with the trajectory of Ms. Rosa, who is trained and works with Montessori pedagogy. According to Nunes (2011), Montessori understood play as an activity of experiencing and representing practical life. For this to happen in school, Montessori designed an environment in the classroom with furniture and everyday objects adapted to the size and needs of the children, allowing them to use, carry and transport them, modifying the space according to their needs. Through these activities and materials that she called “developmental materials for the acquisition of culture”, Montessori believed that children would learn to control their movements, develop motor coordination and seek autonomy and independence when carrying out common everyday tasks.

5 Perceived play

In identifying how the teachers understand play, here we will discuss how it was perceived in the context of returning to face-to-face activities after a year of remote activities. Although we are dealing here with the teachers' perspective, we also seek to endorse our observations with studies that have brought the children's perspective during this period, including how they played (Meirelles *et al.*, 2022) and the feelings expressed in that context (Matos *et al.*, 2022; Fabiani *et al.*, 2021; Marques *et al.*, 2022).

The play perceived by the collaborators during the face-to-face activities in the educational units after the emergency remote activities was related to: reproduced play,

with traces of a digital culture; play with a representation of a confined, static life, without much baggage; and also sick, anxious and confused play in their peer relationships.

Play, as perceived after the pandemic, is marked, according to Ms. Rosa, by aspects of a digital culture, focused on the use of digital media:

“Children are very much in the digital world... 'peppa' plays, 'peppa' jumps in the puddle, 'mister maker' paints, 'PJ Masks' does this and that... but they don't play, they don't live, they just reproduce” (Ms. Rosa).

The perception of play with traces of digital media, especially online platforms, is in line with what Matos *et al.* (2022) point out about play being re-signified by the intensified use of these media. Although we cannot attribute the introduction of children to digital media to the remote teaching of the pandemic, we can say that the incorporation of these technologies into children's daily lives, also through education, has changed the dynamics of life. In front of screens, the static body begins to absorb information that is designed to hold children's attention for a long time (Matos *et al.*, 2022).

Kunz and Costa (2017, p. 16) have already warned that “electronic media do little to meet the needs of human movement”, as they consist of activities in a static virtual world, with meanings and meanings already in place, which influence their values and understanding of the world, stifling the child's creative impetus and interfering in the way they discover and attribute meaning to the world. Matos *et al.* (2022) add that, in the context of children, media and technologies have altered the time and spaces at home and at school, influencing cultural practices such as play. This results in significant changes in communication, social interaction, learning methods and children's perception of reality, as well as their relationships with others and with themselves.

Although the intensification of media use has been a reality, above all so that teaching activities in schools are not completely interrupted, they have also been present in homes, in the hands of children, for other purposes. One of them was communication, as Matos *et al.* (2022) pointed out, in which children used them to communicate with loved

ones such as friends and family, which eased some of the distance they felt. In addition, digital media were also used by guardians to entertain children while they worked or did household chores, as a way of managing their daily lives.

In the midst of a pandemic context, the use of digital media has enabled other forms of relationships, especially at work, the practices of producing human life, as in the case of working from home. This has also had a severe impact on the way children represent their lives, reverberating in their play, as Ms. Rosa explains:

“The children were at home, but the parents were still working [at home], it's impossible for you to pay attention to that child to play and participate with them... so, in a way, they didn't see life happening, they saw the parents at home sitting in front of the computer or at least one of the parents sitting in front of the computer! When life actually happened, people were frustrated, tired, overloaded, and that was the moment of life they saw” (Ms. Rosa).

From this perspective, the children still had everyday life as a representation of their play, but, contrary to what was seen before, the children began to have the reference of a static life, without dynamic representation, as the teacher later explains:

“We see children idle in the park, then we say: - 'how come you're idle in the park'? Here at school, we've never needed lots of toys, slides, because we really encourage free play. Making food in the dirt, baking a cake, climbing a tree, running around and inventing a game with a box... we've always left it free for them to imagine, but without baggage there's no imagination, right? Like a dream... You won't dream if you don't have a reference...” (Ms. Rosa).

Although children played more during the pandemic, especially younger children, they did so alone, which caused concern before the resumption of face-to-face activities, due to the lack of sociability among their peers (Fabiani *et al.*, 2021). This made the children feel lonely and, consequently, homesick due to the lack of peers (Matos *et al.*, 2022), which was even more painful for only children (Meirelles *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, Meirelles *et al.* (2022) point out that even with loneliness and boredom, there were reports that free play showed its potential, even in challenging moments. Even alone, the children

transformed their homes into a universe conducive to different bodily experiences, whether with the rooms or the objects in the house.

Ms. Margarida described the principle of inert play in her speech:

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When you ask them: “What’s your name?” - “What’s your name?” - “Your name...”. They’d repeat it... - “What do you want to play with?” Then the child becomes paralyzed and doesn’t answer [...] during the games I saw a lot of anxiety about playing with the toys and also about learning a game they didn’t know (Ms. Margarida).

In fact, children didn't stop playing at home; however, they started playing alone and possibly less, especially due to the increase in screen time throughout the pandemic (Meirelles *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, children who started school during this period may not have experienced the socialization that play provides, which promotes a learning space between peers, whether in the form of sharing toys, or in the production or reproduction of other games and aspects of their peer cultures (Corsaro, 2003).

The way it is presented, an inert, static and confused body, shows the profound impact that this period has had on children's emotions and feelings. As well as having to deal with loneliness, they also faced insecurity and the fear of the disease affecting their families (Marques *et al.*, 2022). The teacher describes the anxiety of dealing with toys and learning a new game as “a thirst for play”. This may be related to the low level of experience of bodily play, which puts the child in contact with others and the world (Machado, 2013), making children feel the intense urge to satisfy their needs through this inexhaustible source of pleasure that is play (Costa, Kunz, 2017).

You see, these are young children, beings who have only just arrived in the world and are therefore experiencing intense sensory revolutions day after day, as they learn about cultures and decode the language of the world as a body-subject. Limiting the time and space of this energy, even if only momentarily, can become something sickening, with profound long-term impacts. Something like Kunz and Costa (2017) bring up, based on Zur Lippe (1987), a “*Lebensentzug*”, translated as “extraction of life without dying” (p. 14). What

used to be seen as an expression of vitality and dynamism, especially before the time cut-off related to the return to face-to-face activities, was perceived as a sickening act.

Silveira and Cunha (2014, p. 35) point out that play represents the manifestation of this interiority, encompassing a subjective framework that constitutes the child's being and relationships, and which is often forgotten or disregarded by the school. They explain:

The child is (lives) between an interiority and an exteriority. However, school/education only seems to give, stimulate or propose exteriority. Play itself, which is the excellence where intentionality is shown, is now replaced by orders from outside - exteriority, based on mechanistic, idealistic, maturationist theories, where everything has a time and a space of events (phases, stages, progressions, mistakes to avoid, critical components to achieve - science stuff). The subjective and intersubjective intervals, the perception of the lived world, the subject-object relationship, which are one and the same, are forgotten, without forgetting the ecological dimension - history, culture, identity [...].

This invites us to think of play as coming from the child into the world, spontaneously, as a pre-reflective act in their experience of the moment, crossed by elements that constitute them as that child. Because she is the main author of her play in the environment, together with other children who collaborate in an intersubjective network of relationships, she exercises her autonomy and management of her spaces and times. This is an exercise in an educational process of emancipated beings based on subjective experiences of their movement (Silveira, Cunha, 2014; Kunz, Costa, 2017). The authors emphasize the value of experience in the lived world, and not merely presented or reproduced.

6 Conclusions

Initially, it should be said that we did not support a face-to-face educational process, especially at that time, since the Bolsonaro administration used measures that facilitated the spread of the virus, based on the herd immunity thesis, which was not even discussed in scientific circles (Ventura, Reis, 2021). Although children were a population with a lower

risk of worsening the clinical condition, the ease with which the virus spread, a fundamental characteristic for understanding its global impact, meant that Brazil ranked second among the countries with the most child deaths (Hallal, 2021). Only in January 2022 were vaccines against Covid-19 made available for children aged 5 to 11 (Guedes, 2022), and only at the end of December of the same year were they released for children aged 6 months to 5 years (Brasil, 2022), thus covering most of early childhood education.

This paper set out to reflect on children's play after the distancing measures, especially with regard to the incorporation of digital technologies into play. To this end, we took into account the understanding and perception of play from the perspective of early childhood education teachers at that time. In this hermeneutic effort, we sought to understand our collaborators in a brief trajectory, as well as the elements that contributed to understanding the phenomenon of play and its perception when they returned to face-to-face activities in schools.

The play presented and understood by the teachers is not exhausted in this brief section, as they understand the diversity of the world of children, as well as the multiple childhoods it represents. As a result, we can see that there are differences between the teachers in terms of training, whether initial or continuing, as well as different spaces and contexts in which they work, mainly reverberating when it comes to play in Early Childhood Education.

The main elements for understanding play were a creative act of intervention in concrete reality, as a representation of their life contexts and a way of signifying objects and self-managing their lives. Although this was closely related to their training, it is important to take into account the context in which the research was carried out, at the beginning of the return to face-to-face activities, but still far from today's reality. The teachers had also experienced different forms of teaching, such as remote, hybrid and the delivery of materials, among others, and they also felt the distance and the lack of feedback from the children. These factors may have influenced the way they understand and perceive the phenomenon.

Although play can be understood as a powerful act of human resilience, especially in these critical moments, as Meirelles *et al.* (2022) pointed out, play was perceived by the teachers in an anxious way. Powerful for externalizing feelings, but not very “contained” in the relationships between the child, play and the other, something like a sick play in its socializing dimension, with a lack of representation of a dynamic life. Furthermore, it showed that they carry with them aspects of a culture marked by the use of digital media, reverberating in their play, which is nothing new when it comes to this context marked by modern technological revolutions.

This work was not intended to provide answers, but rather to reflect on how these global phenomena can impact on children's lives and how this affects their dialog with the world, expressed through play. Given that the representation of everyday life was something present in the teachers' narratives, the way we deal with our daily lives is noticed and reproduced by the children. This also means that our actions are uninterrupted examples, whether it's caring for ourselves, caring for others or caring for nature, being (re)signified by the children and shaping new ways of being, feeling and acting.

Therefore, reflecting on play in a post-pandemic, endemic and “new normal” world, among so many others discussed in periods of crisis, provokes us to think about ways of welcoming play with different social representations, encompassed by different emotions and feelings arising from phenomena that have a profound impact on the intersubjective fabric of society. May we be able to deal more humanely and lovingly with these impacts, which brutally affect and reflect on children's dialog with the world.

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