

Listening to children as they play

A escuta das crianças por meio de suas brincadeiras

La escucha de los niños a través de sus juegos

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Highlights

Children are active co-participants and act in the environment to get to know it and position themselves socially.

Children build meanings with their peers and create culture in play situations.

Play workshops in research with children enable access to their meanings in interactions with peers.

Abstract

Utilizing interpretative resources available to them, children reveal what they know and create meanings with their peers. We then sought to listen to a group of seven 5-year-old children about a topic that is part of their daily experiences — the family. Through observation of plays fostered, video recorded, and qualitatively analyzed by the researcher, children appear to be protagonists of their microcultures in early childhood education: they create characters and weave relationships constrained to a family scenario. Therefore, listening to children means allowing them to express affections, interests, conflicts, et cetera, taking them as evidence of their understanding and conceptions.

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Keywords

Listening to children. Play. Early Childhood Education. Peer Group.

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| Introduction

Investigations into human ontogenesis and, more recently, Childhood Social Studies have highlighted the protagonism of children, even in the first years of life. Constructivist socio-interactionist approaches, in the first case, understand the child as a co-constructor of their development path (Rogoff, 2005; Vigotski, 2008; Wallon, 2008). What is theoretically underlying is the understanding that they are not passive recipients of teachings but active co-participants, acting in the environment to get to know it and to position themselves socially with continuous social, affective, and intellectual exchanges.

The investigations in Childhood Social Studies reflect the complexity of children's actions in a diverse sociocultural world, pointing to multiple childhoods circumscribed by different historical, economic, and geographic possibilities. They highlight the place children occupy in social relations and their participation in concrete conditions, in which children constitute situations and simultaneously constitute themselves in these situations. The works of Abramowicz (2018), Corsaro (2009; 2011), Sarmiento (2005), Simões and Resnick (2019), among others, can be mentioned.

Therefore, the two major approaches understand that children constitute and develop immersed in the process of social interaction, regulating and being regulated by other/s in a concrete situation, in a present time (Carvalho et al., 2020), but considering past experiences and putting their activities into perspective. In this study, "*interaction* is understood as the potential for regulation between the components of a field; the occurrence of *regulation* occurs when the movements or behaviors of one of the components cannot be understood without considering the existence, presence or behavior of another component(s)" (Carvalho et al., 2020, p. 44).

In this process, behaviors, actions, states of individuals, and even the identity of the partner, physical characteristics, and presence or absence are potential regulators. In the interactional field, individual actions are related and regulated by the actions of other interacting parties, enabling them to construct meanings shared by groups of partners. This statement highlights possible questions about the social participation of young children who do not speak, do not have fluent language, or do not answer questions addressed to them but share meanings and constitute the socio-cultural fabric. The construction of the complex fabric of society implies the active participation of each individual, constituting themselves and the other. Even though they are small, they communicate and portray their version of the world, revealing experiences, learning, and understanding of situations and sensibilities of their social environment. But how does this work?

The participation of any subject in the world occurs with the other or through the other in social interaction. In the case of a child, the interaction occurs with a coeval partner or an adult. With more interpretative resources, this can carry out

differentiated listening to learn more about them and, thus, provide favorable conditions for their full development. Listening to children means allowing them to express affections, feelings, interests, doubts, resistance, conflicts, and understandings about others, things, situations, and events; welcoming them in their insecurities, encouraging them in their achievements, comforting them in their disappointments, to protect them in moments of danger, to support them in their learning, and to challenge them in the appropriate measure for a new step.

Play is recognized as an integral part of peer culture, as an instigator of symbolic exchanges and the appropriation of social objects. It is also considered a rich means of highlighting meanings constructed by children (Ferreira, 2016; Lucena et al., 2021; Oliveira & Haddad, 2020; Santos, 2015).

When investigating the construction of plays in the context of early childhood education, it is assumed that social interactions are privileged instances of creating peer cultures since the processes of meaning and everything that involves them occur in shared situations — in the collective environment of the institution. Meanings are made explicit and specified with the other and through the other: actions are coordinated, themes are adjusted towards a shared topic, activities or objects are added in light of creative developments, resistances are interposed for the interests of one or the other partner to prevail, conciliations are rehearsed, and outcomes are implemented.

The discussion proposed in this article focuses on play as a privileged locus for listening to children, since describing and interpreting this activity is an opportunity to get closer to their point of view, their conceptions and understandings, their emotions and motivations, of their social positioning, in short, of their intellectual, emotional, moral, and aesthetic life. In collective play, children carry out processes of the meaning of the world and themselves with their partners, negotiate, share, interpretively reproduce adult culture, create their unique cultures, and establish emotional bonds (Corsaro, 2011; Lucena et al., 2021; Simões & Resnick, 2019).

According to Bruner (2008), people are the result of a process of producing meanings carried out with the help of symbolic systems of culture. In this sense, negotiating and renegotiating meanings is the finest achievement of human beings, and this process occurs through the mediation of narrative interpretation.

The sharing of meanings with others occurs in specific cultural contexts since the interactants make themselves understood in a given culture. Furthermore, when playing, children perform acts of meaning regarding the world in which they are inserted and, at the same time, appropriate socially available information in the search for creatively meeting the interests specific to their age. Children construct, share, and negotiate meanings about different phenomena in their sociocultural context by regulating and being regulated by others in the different actions of their playful plots (Lira & Pedrosa, 2016).

Corsaro (1988) investigates the processes of construction of cultural routines, considering the child as an active being who builds processes of subjectivation in

interactions with peers, which leads them to produce culture and interpretively reproduce it. From this same theoretical perspective, Corsaro (2011) investigates processes of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction carried out by children based on a concept of socialization that considers how children negotiate, share, and create cultures with adults and their peers, moving away from the notion of a passive child and recipient of adult culture. In this sense He proposes an interpretative approach to child socialization, which understands that children begin their lives as social beings immersed in an already-defined social network.

The interpretative approach is especially relevant for conceptualizing the peer culture of young children: a “[...] stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with their peers” (Corsaro, 2009, p. 32). According to Corsaro (2009), the production of peer culture by children is not a matter of simple and pure imitation, as they creatively apprehend information that they capture from the adult world to produce their own cultures. In the interactional process, children are often exposed to social knowledge they do not fully understand and are subsequently reproduced and reaffirmed in peer group activities and routines. Culture is not in the heads of individuals, points out the author; it is produced and reproduced through public negotiations.

Interested in the complex cultural process of everyday life, Corsaro (1992) brought together three concepts that he considers crucial to understanding the cultural routines established by children: framing, contextualization, and embellishment. According to the author, the first concept was based on a 1974 publication by Goffman and refers to the organization of social events — their interrelations — from which social actors subjectively get involved and develop a hypothesis about what is happening in the situation, identifying events, naming them and conceiving infinite possibilities of concrete occurrences. Corsaro brings as an example a situation of pretend play, in which a child can refer to present objects, such as kitchen equipment, a bed, or a telephone, and say: “We have an oven to cook,” “This is the bed we sleep in,” so that such attitudes can activate possible structures of routines that are familiar in a specific culture.

For the second concept, contextualization, the author was based on a 1982 publication by Gumperz. In collectively produced routines, social actors develop a sensitivity to recognize context clues and then use them. From this perspective, such clues “[...] include aspects of syntactic structure, prosody, paralinguistic features, and nonverbal behaviors which, in different combinations, signal the nature of cultural events and generate them” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 165). As cultural routines are activated and contextualized, they will be ready for transformation, even while being produced. Based on this assumption and continuing his discussion, the author states that the most common type of transformation is embellishment, the third concept proposed based on his own observations.

Embellishment refers to the intensification or magnification of the meaning of certain elements of (or of entire) primary frameworks. Behaviorally, embellishment involves exaggeration of the expansiveness of certain acts, the addition of acts that are related but not essential for the enactment of the

primary framework (routine), and multiple repetitions of particular acts or sequences of acts in a framework. (Corsaro, 1992, p. 165)

In his studies, Corsaro (1992) asserts that most types of embellishment in the routines of children's peers are collective and not personal. Embellishment occurs through a series of cooperatively orchestrated actions through which children prolong or enhance aspects of the cultural routines they are producing.

Investigating processes of meaning construction and the creation of peer culture in children's play situations requires breaking with the adult-centric view that has predominated for a long time in research focused on the categories of children and childhood(s). It also requires a look at how and what children do or say when they are together and why they do it (Buss-Simão, 2012; Carvalho, 2021; Rocha, 2008). According to Ferreira (2005; 2008), it is necessary to reverse the perspective and recognize social reality from childhood(s) and children, which implies understanding them as individual and collective actors committed to acting in their worlds. It is necessary to give visibility to their actions and consolidate their status as social actors through methodologies capable of capturing evidence of how they share, negotiate, and create culture with their peers and adults. It is important to understand the interactional processes in which children construct meanings with their peers and create culture in play situations in early childhood education contexts.

The analysis of children's plays or some play clippings allows us to recognize the effective participation of children in this process. Observing them playing, that is, listening to their conversations, tracing their movements, specifying their occupation of the space, and listening to the noises of laughter, crying, grumbling, and other vocalizations associated with their emotions, among other forms of behavior, allows the researcher to learn about them and the construction they carry out as social actors and co-participants in their childhood journey.

| Research and excerpts from a play

The general objective of the research was to investigate processes of meaning and creation of culture among peers of children, highlighting the protagonism of children in plays encouraged by adults with the theme "family," in the context of early childhood education. Specifically, we sought to (1) recognize play as an integral part of peer culture, an instigator of symbolic exchanges, the appropriation of social objects, and a rich means of highlighting meanings constructed by children, (2) observe how children build their understanding of family based on the actions they perform and their conversations with peers and adults and, finally, and (3) discuss the importance of the adult's role as a supporter of the plays shared by children in the context of early childhood education.

The theme "family" was chosen because it is recurrent in children's plays in the age group studied, as evidenced in Corsaro (2009) and previous research (Haddad & Maynard, 2017; Maynard & Haddad, 2019). Furthermore, the topic is considered paramount for understanding peer culture and the processes of meaning

construction among children since, with rare exceptions, children live in families and, therefore, family contexts are everyday situations.

Seven children aged five years old participated in the research, three boys and four girls, from a Municipal Early Childhood Education Center (Cmei) in Maceió, Alagoas, Brazil. They belonged to the same age group and liked to play together, according to the researcher's observations. The institution was chosen due to its partnership with the University, both in the internship and research fields and, in particular, because of the organization of the space into thematic rooms, with one organized for the symbolic game. The methodological procedure used integrated participant observation sessions with the entire group of children, two reading workshops, and four actual play workshops with a group of seven children. Therefore, the reading and playing workshops corresponded to six sessions. The investigation was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (CAAE nº 52241215.8.0000.5013; Opinion nº 1,477,578) and followed all the requirements indicated by the Resolutions in force.

After the observation sessions with the large group, seven children were invited to a meeting with the researcher, in which the children's consent session occurred — and all agreed to participate in the study. It was preceded by a meeting with the legal guardians for their authorization and signing of the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE). A brief questionnaire was also administered to parents to obtain information on the macroculture that could support the intended analyses, such as who they lived with, siblings, and the location of the child among siblings.

The theme "family" was introduced with the children's book "So Much!" written by Trish Cooke (2006) and illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, in two reading workshop sessions. It is an Afro-Caribbean family whose members arrive, one by one, wanting to hug, kiss, and play with the "so much" baby, who is with his mother at their house. In the final moment, when the father arrives, the reader is surprised with a surprise party for the birthday boy, who is the father. After reading the story, the researcher asks the children if they would like to play "so much." The play is introduced at the end of the reading workshops as if rehearsing the meetings to come.

The proposal for family plays with children is revisited in subsequent workshops. At the beginning of each session, there is a brief moment of conversation in which the researcher recalls the proposal to play as a family and instigates a brief warm-up of the topic, asking, for example, about the role that each child will assume and allowing them to negotiate these roles among themselves. In the final part of each workshop, the proposal remains standing, planning the continuity of the play, as the researcher asks what objects they would need or like for the next meeting. The requested material is brought and added to those already in use.

Researchers have been using workshops in early childhood education centers and foster care institutions as research procedures with children involving conversations, drawings, plays, and theater, which take place in the form of video-recorded sessions in which one or more groups of children are invited to participate

in activities suggested by the adult. The workshops can be divided into a second moment of conversation, asking children what happened in previous plays, using different resources, for example, photos of the session in which they played, to begin the conversation (Ferreira, 2016; Lira & Pedrosa, 2016; Maynard, 2017; Oliveira & Haddad, 2020).

The workshops reported in this research were held in a permanent room organized for symbolic play at the institution. The room has environments called the beauty and fantasy area and the house area, the latter encompassing delimited spaces for the kitchen, laundry area, and bedroom. As playing in this space was part of the children's weekly routine, most of the objects that made up that environment were already familiar to them, except some taken by the researcher at the beginning of the sessions.

The duration of the workshops varied between 40 minutes and 1 hour and a half. From all the video-recorded material, 17 episodes were clipped, from moments of planning the play and from the play itself. Episodes are observation segments selected for analysis, as they provide evidence of the phenomenon being studied — the construction of shared meanings that make up routines, values, and interests about family produced in interactions with partners. The episodes were transcribed in detail — speeches, gestures, children's movements, distribution of objects in space, sounds, and vocalizations, gazes, and signs that are part of their expressiveness — to capture fragments of meanings about what they collectively construct. This method for empirical material description and interpretation is called microgenetic analysis.

| Results and discussion

The research excerpts discussed in this article focus on the emergence and construction of a doll's birthday party, assumed to be Valéria's daughter, one of the seven children in the group. They occurred in the third and fourth workshops, when, respectively, the idea of the play was explained and a longer episode occurred, entitled "*Sing her happy birthday. She will be sad!*" The seven children who participated in the workshops were: Luan (M/5;10), Milena (F/5;3), Gabriel (M/5;11), Vivian (F/5;5), Alisson (M/5;3), Yana (F/5;10) e Valéria (F/5;5)¹.

In the first workshop, after reading the book, the researcher asked if the children liked the story, what it was about, who the characters were, et cetera. Soon after, she asked who wanted to play "so much" and what the play would be like.

In the second reading workshop, the researcher returned to the story read previously and, after some comments made by the children, asked who would like to play "so much." This time, the researcher asked the children about what would happen in this play, who the characters would be, what roles they would take on, and what they would do.

1 The children's names are fictitious to protect their identity. In parentheses is information about the gender and age of each child.

In the third workshop, at the beginning, the researcher informed the children about the proposed family-oriented play, and they negotiated the role of mother (Valéria) and cook (Milena) among themselves. The role of the uncle (Luan) was also indicated, and the children decided that there would be no father in this play. The workshop revolved around the walk Valéria would take with her daughter and the preparation for “her baby’s” birthday.

In the fourth workshop, there was no planning about the roles they would assume in the play. The workshop revolves around the organization and execution of Valéria’s daughter’s birthday party, which will be presented below.

Episode #1: **“I will go for a walk”**

Children involved in the episode: Luan, Milena, and Valéria.

Valéria prepares a small suitcase with “baby” items to take with her on the trip: bottle, towel, panties, diaper. She says she will go alone with her daughter. Valéria takes the doll, puts a disposable diaper under her arm, and pushes the stroller with the doll. She passes Milena and says: *“Hurry up, rum? I want...”*. Milena looks at her. Then, she takes a plastic bag (the supermarket type) and puts some objects in it, including the small suitcase that Valéria had packed but abandoned. Upon seeing the suitcase in the bag, Valéria says: *“Put it in there”* (confirming Milena’s action). She continues pushing the doll’s stroller and reaches the beauty area. Milena follows her, carrying the bag. Valéria looks at the researcher and says: *“I’m going to buy her a toy. For her birthday!”* Researcher: *“Hm, it’s your daughter’s birthday...”* Valéria takes the doll out of the stroller and Milena says something in Valéria’s ear and runs to the stove. Valéria looks back at her colleague and says, frowning and with a reproachful tone of voice: *“It didn’t burn!”* Luan looks at Milena and says: *“It didn’t burn, look”* (shows the objects in his hand). Luan calls out to the researcher: *“Hey, aunt...”*. She responds: *“Hi”*. Luan continues: *“Her little cake is just one thing, and that’s it...”*.

In this episode, the announcement of the birthday party is made by Valéria when she looks at the researcher and says: *“I’m going to buy her a toy. For her birthday!”* But this announcement comes as she prepares for a walk with her daughter, following the whole ritual of leaving the house with a baby: the suitcase, which is organized with a bottle, towel, panties, and diaper; food is also provided to be taken, as the baby does not eat just anything; it has to be a special food, if not breastfeeding. But this measure was thought of by Milena, who was included in the walk’s programming through this cooperative action. The trip was justified by Valéria: it was necessary to buy a toy for her daughter, and from the toy comes “her daughter’s birthday”, in a clear association of “getting a toy” with “getting a present for her birthday!” Birthday resembles cake and in response to Valéria’s speech, who reacts to some observation from Milena, who whispers in her ear and runs to the kitchen, Luan explains the idea of cakes by saying “No, they didn’t burn”. And when showing the objects in his hand he comments: *“Hey aunt... Her cake is just one thing, and that’s it”*. The “framing” process, mentioned by Corsaro (1992), is seen when studying the cultural routines of children, in which they conceive occurrences of actions adjusted to the hypothesis they develop about the situation, in this case, Valeria’s daughter’s birthday party: even without mentioning what did not burn, Luan attributes Valéria’s statement to a cake, because at birthday parties they bake

cakes or cupcakes, or snacks. Subtly, Luan also included himself in the preparation of the party, showing the researcher the cakes in his hands.

The idea for the birthday party may result from the theme of the book “So Much!” which also revolves around a surprise birthday party for the father of a large family. In our culture, children’s birthdays are events that involve inviting other people, mobilizing the children with sweets, buying gifts, playing activities during the party, and other celebratory rituals. Thus, it is possible to assume that children capture information from the adult world and their life contexts and bring them as themes for their plays to problematize, test, and get to know them. It is also important to consider that Valéria was undergoing a new experience in her life with the arrival of a newborn baby, the son of her aunt — a piece of information obtained through the questionnaire administered to family members.

Episode #2: **“Look, I bought it for her!”**

Children involved in the episode: Luan, Milena, Vivian, and Valéria. [...]

Valéria takes the doll in her arms, puts it in the stroller, looks at her colleague, and says: “Let’s go.” Milena says: “I’ll get a thing.” Valéria pushes her stroller with the doll to the biggest dressing table; she takes a bag with a handle, looks at the researcher and says: “Hey, aunt, she’s studying” (referring to the doll). Researcher: “Hm, studying? Already?” Valéria continues: “Yes. It’s for her birthday.” Researcher: “Oh, and what will happen? Where will her birthday be?” Valéria responds: “It will be at my house.” Researcher: “Who’s going to her birthday?” Valéria says: “Huh?” The researcher repeats the question. Valéria: “Me.” Researcher: “Only you?” Valéria: “No; and her” (she points back without looking). Researcher: “She who?” Valéria: “Milena.” Researcher: “Oh, only her?” Luan, at the table, asks: “What about Vivian?” Valéria looks back and says: “Yes, huh?” Luan continues: “And me?” Valéria: “If you want.” She takes the bag, takes out a yellow hair bow and says to the researcher: “Look, I bought it for her!” Researcher: “And what is that?” Valéria: “A hair bow.” Researcher: “Hm, when will she wear it?” Valéria: “Today, huh? At her party!” Valéria keeps the bow and a box of soap in her bag. Milena says: “Hey, aunt, I’m going to make her a gift!” Researcher: “Oh... What will her gift be?” Luan: “A bear.” Milena: “A cell phone.” Researcher: “A cell phone!” Valéria: “Not a cell phone.”

In this second episode, from the same session, Valéria once again reports to the researcher and talks about her daughter’s birthday party. The researcher asks questions to gather more information about the party: where it will be and who will participate. Valéria answers the questions and, little by little, explains what the birthday will be like; she also shows the bow the “daughter” will wear. Luan suggests the gift of a bear, and Milena reveals that she will give a cell phone to Valéria’s daughter, who quickly says no, bringing up the figure of the mother who makes decisions about what she can or cannot do for her young daughter.

The children’s behaviors reveal fragments of meanings of a birthday party, built and shared by them, an event that brings together family and friends and is preceded by preparations: food, guests, a gift to be given, the birthday girl’s attire — a bow hair, an aesthetic detail that will make her more beautiful. If some information is instigated by the researcher, who asks and is interested in knowing more, other information is brought spontaneously, as if part of the understanding that children

have about a baby's birthday, about what to do, and how to behave during it. They are fragments shared with partners, who welcome them but modify them according to their own understandings and needs and embellish them with what they have, offering a counterpart for a new sharing.

Episode #3: ***"Sing her happy birthday. She will be sad!"***

Children involved in the episode: Luan, Milena, Gabriel, Alisson, and Valéria.

Valéria looks at the researcher and says: *"Now, I'm going to make her sleep because she... So she doesn't look at her birthday"*. Gabriel shows the modeling clay in his hands and says: *"Look, I bought it for the daughter!"* Researcher: *"And what is that?"* Valéria says in a reproachful tone: *"It's her birthday food."* Gabriel crumples the plasticine and says something very quietly. The researcher repeats: *"Food for her birthday?"* Valéria: *"The cake!"* Gabriel calls Valéria, gives her the modeling clay and says: *"Hey! For the girl!"* Valéria takes the modeling clay, sits at the table, puts it on a plate and cuts it with a spoon. Gabriel takes the modeling clay he had given to Valéria and says: *"Let me do it, will you?"* Valéria hands it to him and says: *"Do it."* The researcher says something to Alisson, and Valéria catches her attention: *"Auntie, you're not supposed to say anything!"* Researcher: *"Why?"* Valéria: *"Because she's sleeping."* Gabriel is at the table, cuts pieces of modeling clay with a knife, distributes them on plates and says: *"Hey, auntie, I'm making a birthday cake!"* Researcher: *"And what are you doing?"* Valéria: *"Cake, right?"* Gabriel: *"Cupcake"*. Researcher: *"A cupcake?"* Valéria once again puts her finger in her mouth and says: *"Shhh!"* (she asks for silence). Then she smiles. [...] She goes close to Gabriel and says: *"Make the food. Go; do it."* Gabriel hands Valéria a plate with a piece of modeling clay and says: *"It's ready."* Valéria puts the plate aside, on the table. With one hand on her hip, she looks at her colleague and says: *"Make another one, for the family."* Gabriel responds: *"It's for the family!"* Gabriel hands over another plate with a piece of modeling clay inside and says: *"I already made it."* He extends his arm to hand it to Valéria: *"I already made it, look"* and goes to the microwave. [...] Milena, Gabriel and Valéria touch the microwave ovens and stove and talk (inaudible). Milena says: *"The cake is still cold."* The three leave. Alisson and Milena approach the table. Milena pulls out a plate, next to Gabriel, and he pulls it back and says: *"I'm making the cake!"* Milena responds: *"It's me!"* Gabriel reinforces: *"It's me!"* [...] Gabriel says: *"There is someone else who will bring a fork."* Luan, who is in the beauty field, says: *"I'm going to take nail polish for her mother to polish her nails!"* Gabriel places other dishes next to the "ready" ones and says: *"More cake. The cake is already finished."* Valéria says: *"And the soda?"* Valéria and Gabriel arrange the plates and cups on the table. Milena approaches and says: *"And the baby's cake is already on the fire."* Valéria points to the various plates with pieces of plasticine placed on the table and says: *"No, here!"* She shows the plates and puts her hands on her hips. Gabriel says: *"That's the cakes!"* Then, she points to the stove and microwave oven and says: *"It's there, her cake."* Milena opens the microwave [...] Gabriel looks at the researcher and says: *"Oh... the... the party."* He picks up a bottle of coffee, puts it on the table and says, *"Here's juice."* Alisson, Milena, and Gabriel are around the table. Valéria takes the "baby" in her arm, brings her to the table and says, looking around: *"I'm embarrassed to talk."* Researcher: *"Embarrassed? Embarrassed of what?"* Valéria: *"To talk!"* She calls Milena close. Gabriel looks at the researcher and says: *"Hey, aunt, that's juice. Anyone who wants juice can get it."* With the doll on her lap, Valéria says to Milena: *"Go, sing her happy birthday!"* Milena removes the cutlery from the plates and says: *"Now, I'm going to put it on the fire."* Valéria touches his arm with an angry look and says: *"No. It's the forks."* She takes them and distribute them again on the plates. Milena goes to the stove. Gabriel and Milena continue to organize the table. Valéria tells her colleagues again: *"Sing her happy birthday. She will be sad!"* After insisting that

her colleagues sing happy birthday to “her daughter,” Valéria goes towards her room and says: “*I’ll put her in the stroller, then.*” [...] After a few minutes Alisson calls his colleagues: “*Sing happy birthday!*” Clapping his hands, Gabriel begins: “*Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you...*” Alison smiles. Valéria looks at Gabriel and gives a smile. Milena also starts to sing. Alisson also sings and claps. Valéria rests her arms on a chair, smiles sheepishly and looks at her colleagues, who continue: “*Happy birthday, dear...*” The children look at each other. Researcher: “*So, what’s her name?*” (because in this song, the birthday girl’s name is mentioned at the end). Valéria looks at the researcher and says: “*Maria!*” Gabriel pulls: “*Maria! Maria! Maria! Maria!*” Alisson and Milena accompany. Valéria smiles, looks at Gabriel and says: “*Do you want her cake?*” She takes a plate and gives the doll cake. Then she puts it on the table and says: “*No more!*” indicating that the baby is already satisfied. As the children “eat” the cake, they leave the scene; and the play is over.

The episode that stages Valéria’s daughter’s birthday party reveals a place of interpretation and recreation of adult culture, according to the interpretative approach of Corsaro (2009; 2011). The idea of a birthday party for the daughter activated structures of family routines, and it was possible to reproduce them because children belong to a specific culture in which birthday parties are celebrated with guests, food and drink, and preparation that involves people and actions. The fact that they are part of the educational context daily, in which they share specific situations, also facilitates expectations about the developments of the play and how they monitor participation in the event.

The birthday party is presented in a sequence that involves preparing the food and drinks, setting the table, getting around, positioning the birthday girl, singing Happy Birthday, and eating the cake. In the preparations, the actions ranged from making the daughter sleep so that she would not see the party being prepared, making sure the daughter did not wake up with the noise, handling the modeling clay to make the cake, taking it to the oven, checking if it was ready, realizing that it was necessary to make more cake, as it was for the “family,” thinking of someone to bring forks, have soda and juice as drinks, set the table with plates, forks, and glasses, and even provide nail polish for the “mother (Valéria) polish her daughter’s nails,” an aesthetic concern with the birthday girl’s appearance.

The points mentioned reveal the complexity of the organization of the cultural routine: how the party will be held, what preparations are necessary, and what is up to each partner to do — and this reveals the hierarchy of interpersonal relationships, disputes, their understanding and possibilities of what to do in this intricate network of relationships. This whole plot does not end only at the end: the singing of Happy Birthday. It is just the culmination of the celebration! It is a sequence of shared actions so that each actor contributes with something that makes sense to this collective enterprise. According to Corsaro (2011), children, in addition to ensuring the theme they share in play, take ownership of their characters and act with ease, carrying out the role assigned to them by themselves but with the recognition of others — the role of mother, friend, helper, et cetera. Meanings are updated at each moment, and each person’s participation is adjusted to their role, which was “negotiated” according to the hierarchy of ongoing interpersonal relationships. This understanding makes the plot flow spontaneously: new actions

are improvised, new devices are introduced, and new outcomes are recognized and incorporated, expanding the playful enterprise, and embellishing it.

According to Bruner (2008, p. 70), meaning is a “culturally mediated phenomenon that depends upon the prior existence of a shared symbol system.” Children's participation in family birthday parties suggests these elements that are brought, negotiated, and shared by the group.

When inserting these elements, the rules that accompany them must be observed. “The baby's” birthday must have small plates with cakes placed on the table, forks for the plates, and so on. In this episode, in addition to the rules adopted for the birthday party, those adopted for the role of mother of the birthday girl are worth highlighting. Valéria shows care and concern for her daughter when she asks the researcher to remain silent so as not to wake her; she guides Gabriel on what he should do and how he should do something, which can be seen in the moments when she tells him to make her daughter's birthday and then asks him if it is ready; she uses her authority as a mother to ensure that everything goes well on the baby's birthday.

Finally, the episode highlights the construction of a play routine between children around the theme of the daughter's birthday party. Valéria reveals the meaning of a mother who plans her daughter's birthday and gets involved in organizing the party. Partners are involved in the preparations, with coordinated cooperative actions. Also noteworthy are the relationships experienced by the group of children (cordial and complementary), despite some opposition from Valéria and disputes between Milena and Gabriel over who was making the birthday cake.

| Final considerations

The study sought to investigate processes of meaning and creation of culture among children's peers, highlighting the protagonism of children in plays encouraged by adults with the theme “family” in the context of early childhood education. It started from the assumption that listening to children means allowing them to reveal, in their own way, with the resources they have at their disposal, their understanding of the sociocultural environment — relationships between people, beliefs, values, aesthetic appreciation, and rules and routines of how to interact with others, disposing of objects, and experiencing events and situations that surround them. It means welcoming their affections, feelings, and interests, supporting them, protecting them, comforting them if necessary, and encouraging them towards new achievements.

Conceiving the child as a social agent, that is, an agent of assimilation, creation, and transmission of culture and their own development, play constituted a locus of peer culture, as it enabled the construction of new meanings. The data analyzed reveal the complexity of a play situation between children in the interactional field. They involve planning, division, and organization of spaces, constitution of roles, protagonism of the characters who act out the situation, understanding of interpersonal relationships, and choice of materials. Therefore, there are

adjustments and unfolding of meanings made explicit and assimilated by children in confrontation with each other.

The methodology of family play workshops adopted in this study was fruitful in investigating the processes of meaning experienced by children in their peer cultures, as it made it possible, through their agencies, to reveal how they deal with elements that constitute child's play, such as the attribution, negotiation, and sharing of social meanings. The workshops were also able to reveal the rules created by the group, the meanings attributed to objects, and the play routines that were established, among other aspects. Despite the cost involved in preparation time and data collection in a day-to-day situation at a preschool, the time involved in microgenetic analysis with detailed descriptions of what children do and how they do it, this methodological investigation procedure seems to respect the protagonism of children, because it focuses on what they say and do in their own play — a high priority activity for them.

The data presented reveal fragments of the children's meanings regarding the organization and execution of Valéria's daughter's birthday party, how these meanings are learned by the group from their daily (or almost daily) meetings, in which each one brings for the here and now, their unique experiences. The empirical material highlighted details of the group's social relationships: how their emotions and affections are constructed, displayed, and revealed; relationships and affections supposedly circumscribed in the contexts of which they are part, such as the family, since the instruction given to children was: how about playing family?

In the interactional exchanges, the birthday party unfolded and became more specific with the incorporation of context elements (organization of space — the area of beauty and fantasy, area of the house, with delimited spaces for the kitchen, laundry area, and bedroom), it was also adjusting to the preschool space, in which there are implicit and explicit expectations and rules about how to behave, the number and gender of partners interested in the same venture, et cetera. In addition to the context, the framing of the activity provides a more comprehensive understanding of what happens in the family, who its characters are, what they do, and how they relate to each other.

When playing at the daughter's birthday party, children “talk” about what they know, how they understand, and what they have already learned about this event; this play also reveals how, in their own way, they introduce themselves to these cultural routines. Adults, researchers, educators, parents, and people interested in learning about children listen to what they have to say. For educators, specifically, listening guides their actions, their planning, and their interventions, which must be adjusted to support the children, providing means and situations in which they can build their autonomy and their relationship with others, their way of being in the world, their learning, their development path. It is an interested and technically competent listening, that is, articulated with what can be done for them to promote their well-being and growth.

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Resumo

Com recursos interpretativos de que dispõem, crianças revelam o que sabem e criam significações com seus pares. Buscou-se, então, escutar um grupo de sete crianças de 5 anos sobre um tema que faz parte de suas vivências cotidianas – a família. Por meio da observação de brincadeiras instadas, videogravadas e analisadas qualitativamente pela pesquisadora no contexto da educação infantil, as crianças revelam ser protagonistas de suas microculturas: criam personagens e tecem relações circunscritas a um cenário de família. Portanto, escutar crianças é permitir que manifestem afetos, interesses, discordâncias, conflitos e propostas, tomando-os como indícios de suas compreensões e concepções.

Palavras-chave: Escuta das crianças. Brincadeira. Educação Infantil. Grupo de pares.

Resumen

Con los recursos interpretativos que disponen, los niños revelan lo que saben y crean significados con sus compañeros. Luego, buscamos escuchar a un grupo de siete niños de 5 años sobre un tema que forma parte de sus experiencias cotidianas – la familia. A través de la observación de juegos, grabados en vídeo y analizados cualitativamente por la investigadora, en el contexto de la educación infantil, los niños se revelan protagonistas de sus microculturas: crean personajes y tejen relaciones circunscritas a un escenario familiar. Por lo tanto, escuchar a los niños es permitirles expresar afectos, intereses, desacuerdos, conflictos y propuestas, tomándolos como evidencia de sus comprensiones y concepciones.

Palabras clave: Escucha de los niños. Juegos. Educación Infantil. Un par de niños.

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