

## Lived experiences of babies in an Early Childhood Center in Belo Horizonte

### *Vivências de bebês no contexto de um berçário em Belo Horizonte<sup>1</sup>*

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the lived experiences of a group of babies in a collective context of education and care. Based on the dialogue between Cultural-Historical Theory and Ethnography in Education, we followed a group of 13 babies, aged between 10 months to 1 year and 2 months, for six months, seeking to understand their experiences in this context. The empirical material was built through filmic and photographic records, fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews with adults. The babies approached each other provoked by physical touch, cultural artifacts and initial play in the infant's room. We argue that approaching each other can be understood as the movement performed by babies, constituting a semantic field through the lived experiences in that context and enabling the relationship between them. In this context, a representative history of the lived experiences constituted in the infant's room was selected, which revealed acts of care through which two babies, Ícaro and Giulia, initiated and sustained their relationships in the educational space. The analyzes reveal (i) the attractive force of cultural artifacts; (ii) the diversity of activities listed in the nursery routine; (ii) the great value in the relationship with the teachers; (iii) the fleeting nature of babies' interactive dynamics.

*Keywords:* Babies. Early Childhood Education. Lived experiences. Ethnography in Education. Cultural-historical theory.

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## RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as vivências de um grupo de bebês inseridos/as em um contexto coletivo de educação e cuidados. Com base no diálogo entre a Teoria Histórico-Cultural e a Etnografia em Educação, acompanhamos um grupo de 13 bebês, com idades entre 10 meses a 1 ano e 2 meses, durante seis meses, visando o conhecimento das suas vivências nesse contexto. O material empírico foi construído por meio de registros filmicos, fotográficos, anotações em diário de campo e entrevistas semiestruturadas com professoras. Os/as bebês se aproximaram provocados pelo toque corporal, pelos artefatos e iniciaram brincadeiras no berçário. Argumentamos que a aproximação pode ser compreendida como o movimento realizado pelos/as bebês, constituindo um campo de sentidos por meio das vivências naquele contexto e possibilitando a relação entre eles/as. Selecionamos um caso expressivo das vivências de dois bebês, Ícaro e Giulia. Tais vivências revelaram atos de cuidado pelos quais os dois bebês iniciaram e sustentaram suas relações no espaço educacional. As análises revelam (i) a força atrativa dos artefatos culturais; (ii) a diversidade de atividades elencadas na rotina do berçário; (iii) a preciosidade da relação com as professoras; (iv) a fugacidade da dinâmica interativa dos bebês.

*Palavras-chave:* Bebês. Educação Infantil. Vivência. Etnografia em Educação. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

## Introduction

In this article, we aim to analyze the lived experiences of a group of babies enrolled in an Early Childhood Education Center in Belo Horizonte (ECEC Ciranda). In particular, we will focus on the lived experiences constituted in the relationships between two babies, Ícaro and Giulia<sup>2</sup>, based on the Cultural-Historical Theory and Ethnography in Education. Ethnography in Education enables the researcher to remain permanently in a social group, in order to understand the meanings of the actions and social practices constructed by the group members. Consequently, this allows the researcher to produce a broad description of the cultural knowledge of the group researched (GREEN; DIXON; ZAHARLICK, 2005).

Cultural-Historical Theory argues that human constitution is intrinsically related to biological, cultural, social and historical aspects that demarcate and constitute us in a dialectical process of humanization (VYGOTSKY, 1929/2000a). For cultural development of the human

being to occur, that is, the human constitution as a social person, a shared construction is necessary in which the child and their companions, whether other children and/or adults, are constructed through social relationships. Such relationships

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<sup>2</sup> All names used in this work are fictitious, aiming to preserve the identity of the participating subjects.

constitute a complex system based on the way “in which social actors are situated in relation to each other within a given social formation and which behaviors (ways of acting, thinking, speaking and feeling) are expected of them because of these positions” (PINO, 2005, p.106).

The insertion in culture causes a double birth - the biological and “the cultural, since merely the biological birth is not enough for the emergence of these defining functions of the human” (VYGOTSKY, *apud* PINO, 2005, p. 47). With this, a baby will only be constituted as a human being by the other and the social relationships they establish throughout their life. In this sense, the insertion in a context of an Early Childhood Education Center will mark the subjective constitution of babies.

Thus, human development occurs in the dialectical relationship established between the person and the social environment, including other people, being constituted in the indivisible unit [person/sociocultural environment] called lived experience. Lived experience (*perezhivanie*, in Russian) is understood as:

A unity in which, on the one hand, indivisibly, the environment, that which is experienced is represented – the lived experience is always linked to what is located outside the person – and, on the other hand, it is represented as I experience it, or that is, all the particularities of the personality and all the particularities of the environment are presented in the lived experience (VYGOTSKY, 1933-1934/ 2010, p. 686).

Vygotsky emphasizes that the environment must be understood as variable and dynamic, since it is constantly changing (VYGOTSKY, 1933-1934/ 2010). Furthermore, when different people find themselves in the same situation, different lived experiences are constituted, affecting each one of them differently, and also enabling different learning. Veresov and Fleer (2016) argue that lived experience, as a theoretical concept and an analytical tool, allows the study of cultural development process understood as drama (VYGOTSKY, 1929/2000). “Development is not a linear process; it is a complex and contradictory process. These contradictions exist in the form of drama, dramatic events, collisions and confrontations between people” (VERESOV; FLEER, 2016, p. 327). In this sense, the lived experiences reveal the affect/cognition unit in the development process (FLEER, 2016; TOASSA, 2009).

There are few studies based on the concept of lived experience as a way of understanding the human constitution in the field of Early Childhood Education<sup>3</sup>. Oliveira and Gomes (2017), for example, investigate the conditions and lived experiences that occurred in the cultural environment (a nursery) that enabled the constitution of babies and educators as human beings. The authors emphasize that there is a continuous clash between the organic and cultural dimensions, and between body and mind, in this process of constitution. This clash became particularly visible in the walking and speaking learnig processes of the investigated babies.

The potential of babies to interact and form social relationships are identified from the observations of the relationships between babies and older children, as well as through the perceptions and meanings that adults give to such relationships established between children. In this sense, studies on the skills to interact and the various communicative expressions used by babies when establishing social relationships, such as looking, smiling, crying, touching, babbling, among others, are noteworthy (SCHIMITT, 2008; MCGAHA *et al*, 2011; COSTA, 2012; COUTINHO, 2013; CASTELLI; DELGADO, 2015).

In the next section, we will briefly present the “Childhood and Schooling” Research Program, to which this investigation is linked, and the ECEC Ciranda. Next, we will explain how the construction of the logic of investigation was used in order to identify a representative history of the lived experiences constituted in the nursery environment. Finally, we will analyze the history of the relationships established between two babies, Ícaro and Giulia, which was presented as a telling case (MITCHELL, 1984) of the various relational possibilities in this collective space of care and education.

### **At the gateway: a look at the investigated context**

As already mentioned, our objective is to understand the lived experiences constituted by a group of babies through the interactive dynamics established with a social environment, in the context of the nursery at ECEC Ciranda, between June and December 2017. Thus, we focus on the way in which such interactional processes occur and the production of meanings constructed in the approaches between the babies.

This study is linked to the “*Childhood and Schooling*” Research Program which is in progress. This program, based on Historical-Cultural Theory and Ethnography in Education, seeks to understand the process of cultural development of babies in collective contexts of care and education<sup>3</sup>. The empirical material is constructed through participant observation, field diary entries, video recordings and interviews with teachers and the babies’ families<sup>4</sup>.

ECEC Ciranda is located in the western region of Belo Horizonte and served 440 children at the time of the research. It is constructed on an area of 3,200 m<sup>2</sup>, with a very large physical space that houses a two-story building. In the external area of the center, there is a parking lot and two large playgrounds. The first floor is located at the entrance to the school, in a space composed of a green area, swings, a slide and a solarium available for the nursery children. On the side of the institution, there is

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<sup>3</sup> More information about the “Infância e Escolarização” (Childhood and Schooling) Program can be found at <https://enlacei.com.br/>

<sup>4</sup> The interviews make up the larger research, but their data was not included in the analysis proposed by this specific article.

another playground, with a variety of attractions, such as slides, playground horses, a little house, among others. Further back, the center's grove is located. It is a large green area, with trees and uneven terrain, in addition to a vegetable garden that was being cultivated. This space provides moments of leisure for children and comfort for the institution's employees.

Upon entering its corridors, those who arrive there feel welcomed. Several mobiles, made by the children, hang from the ceiling - the images portray the synthesis of the projects carried out by the classes and a diversity of photos and objects that demonstrate that this center has a magic that is not seen in other schools (GOULART; MARTINS, 2016). The following is an image of the institution's space.

FIGURE 1: ECEC Ciranda space organized by the teachers.



SOURCE: Personal archive.

With an innovative proposal for organizing educational spaces, the center transformed the traditional activity rooms, intended for children between 3 and 5 years old, into workshops, based on the practice experienced in Reggio Emilia. This educational concept was inspired by Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian educator and psychologist (EDWARDS; GANDINI; FORMAN, 1999) who proposed the creation of workshops, spaces within the environment of Early Childhood Education centers that seek to “emphasize the child’s expression, the use of multiple materials and research on the processes of meaning in children and adults” (GOULART and MARTINS,

2016, p. 30). In the workshops, the children's educational process involves valuing expressiveness and creativity through the exploration of the most diverse materials. In this way, the development of multiple languages of children is sought. In 2017, at the time of the research, ECEC Ciranda had eight workshops: Visual Arts, Construction, Digital, Make-Believe, Light, Research, Recycling and Sounds. In each workshop, there was a central space for holding conversation circles (GOULART; MARTINS, 2016). The space intended for the infants' room consisted of the stimulation room, sleep room, bathroom and conservatory. In 2017, the class had thirteen full time babies (between 7:00 am and 5:20 pm). There were seven teachers and an assistant with different schedules in the class. We observed that the organization of the center's times and spaces sought to provide children with different experiences through exploration and imagination, providing the expansion of the different languages in the institutional routine.

Next, we will explain the construction of the logic of investigation for the analysis of the empirical material, enabling the identification of a representative history of the lived experiences constituted through the social relations among the babies in the nursery.

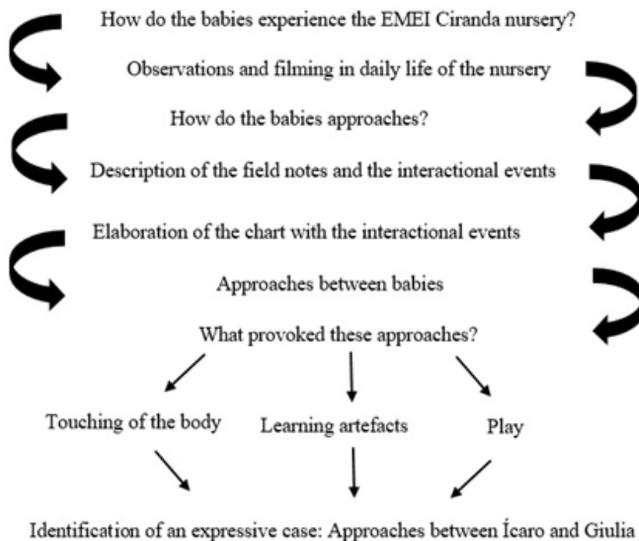
### **Construction of the logic of investigation: strategies for identifying the representative history of social relationships and lived experiences of babies**

We consider that the exercise of reading the unit [person/socio-cultural environment], that is, recognizing the lived experiences (*perezhivanie*) constituted by the group of babies in the nursery space, requires special attention to the methods used by children when instituting their approaches with other babies, adults and learning artifacts.

After the conclusion of the period of construction of the empirical material, we developed a logic of investigation that would help us to identify the main dimensions of the babies' lived experiences in that context (Figure 2). As can be seen in Figure 2, from the observations and filming of the center routine, a central question emerged: "How do babies approach each other?". Based on this question, we produced a detailed description of field notes and interactional events. Our film records totaled 200 hours and we identified 72 events of social relationships between the babies. We define an event as a sequence of actions (with or without the presence of other babies and adults) around a specific theme and/or objective. An event, therefore, is a result of the processes experienced by the participants and is analytically identified *a posteriori* when we recognize its beginning, development and its end (NEVES *et al.*, 2018). The recording of these events was organized in a table with information about the date and time of the video recording, the proposed activity and a thoroughly detailed description of the event. The exercise of building the table was essential for us to examine, more accurately, the development of the approaches of the babies with other babies, adults and learning artifacts.

In the construction of this table, we observed that the babies, when interacting

FIGURE 2: Logic of investigation.



SOURCE: Prepared by the authors.

with people in the nursery, approached each other and, by doing this movement, triggered the possibility of establishing a social relationship that occurred, or not, with the acceptance of the other person. With this, we noticed that, in order to analyze the interactive dynamics of the babies, we would need to observe what caused the approach between them and the teachers and how this approach was carried out. In this sense, an approach can be understood as the movement performed by the babies, constituting a semantic field through the lived experiences in that context and enabling the relationship between them. In other words, the children approached each other and, with this action, triggered the possibility of a relationship. When they were close to people, an invitation to perform a certain action was instituted. When the other person, whether an adult and/or another child, responded positively to the invitation, a field of meaning for action was built and a social relationship was established between them. We understand that “meaning” is “conceived as a particular semantic event, constituted through social relations, where a range of signs is put into play, which allows the emergence of processes of singularization in a historically and culturally situated interactional plot” (BARROS *et al*, 2009, p. 178)

When observing the development of approaches between the children, it was

necessary to verify, describe and analyze what caused each approach, in which way it was established and what were its consequences for the group. Thus, in the approaches between children, we identified three recurrent categories: i) approach caused by cultural artifacts (toy or other object); ii) approach provoked by touch; iii) structured approach in the form of play.

We emphasize that the construction of the categories was a strategy to identify what, in fact, emerged from the empirical material, thus allowing us to have a broad view of the dynamics that occurred in the context of the nursery and to detect a telling case (MITCHELL, 1984) to be microgenetically analyzed: the relationships established between Ícaro and Giulia. These relationships were presented as a revealing example of the multiple relational possibilities, demonstrating elements that are barely observable in the daily life of ECEC Ciranda. Therefore, in the next topic, we will analyze this story.

### **The process of Ícaro and Giulia's human constitution in the collective space of care and education**

Ícaro was a baby that interested us from the moment we entered the center. At fourteen months, he was the oldest baby in the class and certainly the most vigorous. However, he was still crawling. As a result, Ícaro did not have much control over his movements or his strength. When approaching other children, he would literally “throw himself” on them. Most of the time, this approach resulted in the classmate, who was “run over” by his sudden movements, crying, and also in a warning from the teachers: “Careful, Ícaro!”; “Oh! again?”. With classmates crying frequently, as well as Ícaro's need to interact with them, there was always tension in the air that mobilized the entire group. He was the baby who demanded more attentive care from adults. His approach was usually carefully observed by the teachers who, being alert, often prevented a meeting between him and a classmate from happening, as a preventive measure of a possible future accident. At the same time that there was a certain restriction on Ícaro's physical approaches - the teachers encouraged more delicate ways of interacting – “Careful! Slow down, Ícaro!” – and touching the classmate, which was always called “gentle stroking”.

Giulia, 12 months old, was already walking when the research began. The baby has three siblings. One of these, Melissa, her twin sister, was also part of the researched group. Giulia was perceived by her family as “agitated and angry” but by the teachers as “relaxed and cheerful”. However, it is worth adding that the child was one of smallest among the others in the researched group.

It is necessary to clarify, as previously described, that, by choosing the lived experiences as an analytical tool to understand the relationships established between these two babies, we seek to capture the multiform transformations that affect both the socio-cultural environment as well as the babies in the flow of events. The three

selected events unfolded through verbal and non-verbal expressions between babies and adults (Figure 3).

The first event took place on 6/14/2017. We observed, in this event, a singular occurrence that surprised us. The lived experience established in the group, especially between the two protagonists, contradicts what had been previously happening when babies cried because of Ícaro's approach. This time, Ícaro finds a partner that supports the approach, creating a new meaning in the relationship between them and constituting a new starting point for changes in the development of all the participants.

On this day, upon arriving at the nursery, the babies were placed on the mat to play with the plastic toys (dolls, dice, ducks, pets, etc). One of the teachers received the children, while the other was sitting next to those who had already arrived. The babies explored the materials until it was time for milk. After this ended, new cultural artifacts were placed in the center of the room. However, the box itself that contained the objects became a target of curiosity for the children. Several babies approached, hit the box and explored it by turning it from side to side. At a given moment, Murilo, one of the babies of the investigated group, enters the toy box. After this, Ícaro crawls towards Murilo. When he gets close to the baby, he moves the box abruptly. The teacher then warns Ícaro, saying: "Ícaro, be nice to the baby. Oh, watch out." Ícaro moves away from his classmate without trying to remove him out of the box and take it for himself. Even so, Murilo cries.

Afterwards, the teacher helps Ícaro to stand up and he takes his first steps, thus registering a solemn moment in his development. Ícaro is applauded by the teacher under the watchful eye of his classmates, including Giulia. Murilo comes out of the box, leaving the children's object of desire free for further exploration. Ícaro and Giulia go to the box and she lies down beside it. In order to take possession of the box, Ícaro climbs over Giulia, placing his right leg on the girl's head (Figure 3, frame 1). The teacher approaches them and says: "Careful, see? Oh, Ícaro, watch out for your little classmate." Then she helps Ícaro to sit inside the box. For her part, Giulia does not cry. She simply gets up and stays in a sitting position, looking at the mat. Afterwards, Giulia leaves in order to get the toys and the teacher puts the box away, after Ícaro comes out of it.

On this day, we observed Ícaro's first steps and also a new way of relating, bringing new meanings to the relationship between children. Since Giulia does not cry and supports Ícaro's abrupt approach, she initiates something new in the ways of interacting. Giulia and Ícaro open new meanings for bringing the group together, enabling new lived experiences. From the children's actions, we can infer that the new meaning that was initiated is related to the possibility of supporting the approach between Giulia and Ícaro.

This way of supporting, which started in June 2017, was developed throughout the year and culminated in two other events that denote the construction of a positive approach between the two children. The second event took place on 11/16/2017 and

FIGURE 3: Interactional events analyzed.



SOURCE: Research archive.

proves that that situation that occurred in June had changed the relationship between the two babies. This is because Giulia accepts Ícaro's limits and possibilities and demonstrates that there was an acceptance and support on the part of the baby, expanding ways of experiencing the approaches within the nursery. As we will see below, the meanings that were initiated in the relationship in which she supports Ícaro are transformed and expanded, as now it is she who seeks Ícaro in order to hug him (Figure 3, frame 2).

On this day, the teachers place small balls on the mat. The babies explore the space and the feeding chairs while one of the teachers guides the children who woke up towards the stimulation room. The teachers, along with the assistant, remain seated close to the children, while the small children play, until a sound equivalent to a knocking on the door occurs. Ícaro had gotten up from his crib and knocked on the door, waiting for an adult to pick him up. The assistant, demonstrating attentiveness, warns the teacher that Ícaro had woken up. The teacher goes to the sleeping room, puts Ícaro on her lap and updates records, on a wall, related to the children's routine in the nursery (feeding, sleeping and hygiene times for the children). Giulia, who was examining a toy, leaves the artifact on the mat and goes to get together with Ícaro. However, a stroller prevents her from going to the other space. The baby struggles to overcome the obstacle: she puts one foot on the stroller, then the other and leans on the black armchair (Figure 4).

Following this, the teacher completes the records and realizes that Giulia is trying to climb the stroller. She takes the baby by the hand and lifts her out of the stroller. Giulia descends and stares at Ícaro. She tries to get his attention, gesturing a good-bye sign. Ícaro is placed on the floor of the stimulation room and Giulia smiles at him. The baby opens her arms to Ícaro, indicating the desire to hug him. Ícaro, however, shows no reaction. He looks at Giulia and she holds her arms out towards him. The teacher bends down to the children's height and says: "Give her a hug, Ícaro". The babies hug each other. The teacher says: "What a nice hug!" (Figure 5). After the hug, Ícaro and Giulia move away from each other and choose other partners to play with.

In the course of this event, we noticed the care taken by the teacher to bring Ícaro to socialize with his classmates. Furthermore, we realized that the children request this care through communicative expressions, such as Ícaro when knocking on the door, or if he had cried, or even screamed, expressing himself in the search for the other. However, when the adult responds to these manifestations of the children, that is, when offering her lap, changing a diaper, feeding the baby, this allows the constitution of a relationship based on the emotional manifestation. For Wallon (1975), emotion is one of the constitutive aspects of man and is manifested in relationships with others from the moment of birth. Wallon (*apud* CERISARA, 1997, p. 42) argues that emotion in childhood “is the way in which the child mobilizes the other in order to meet their desires and needs”. In this sense, the relationships of care established in the context of the nursery are configured as responses to the emotional manifestations of the small children, also presenting themselves as educational actions: the babies learn to express their needs, seek help to satisfy them and accept the help offered – thus completing the care cycle in that context (NODDINGS, 2013; KATZ *et al*, 2020).

In addition, we observed that the moment when Giulia approaches Ícaro and tries to climb into the baby carriage by leaning on the armchair. This reveals that the babies interact with the various cultural artifacts present in the space, changing them through their interactive actions, by enabling new uses for them. This was observed when little Giulia makes an exceptional effort when climbing over the stroller that prevented her from getting together with Ícaro. Meanwhile, the teacher remained engaged with her notes on the wall and had not noticed Giulia’s presence. Schmitt (2008, p. 127) argues that the relationships established by children at a distance from the adult, prevent the latter “from directly following all the actions of the babies, which imposes on them the need to think of an organized space in an attractive and safe way for the actions they will constitute far from their immediate interference”. One of the ways used by the teachers when proposing a safe environment was to place the baby stroller next to the armchair in the stimulation room, preventing the small children from moving alone to the sleeping room and/or bathroom.

We also observed how Giulia tried to hug her classmate who had just woken up. She stares and gestures at Ícaro in an attempt to get his attention, as the baby doesn’t make eye contact with her. Noticing that Ícaro is about to leave the teacher’s lap, Giulia smiles at him and opens her arms for a hug. Ícaro looks at her, but doesn’t give her the desired hug. At this moment, the teacher translates Giulia’s action, naming the girl’s action who, still without words to express her desire, expresses it through her body – open arms towards her classmate. The teacher then assumes a position of potentializing the baby’s action through oral language (“Give her a hug, Ícaro!”). This shows how words, gestures, looks and actions create a field of meanings that is manifested in their lived experiences and that sustains the relationship between children (VYGOTSKY, 1933-1934/2010). It should be noted that the establishment of relationships are the result of intentional choices made by the babies in that context (TOMASELLO, 2003).

FIGURE 4: Giulia trying to climb into the armchair.



SOURCE: Research archive.

FIGURE 5: Giulia hugs Ícaro.



SOURCE: Research archive.

As already mentioned, in the course of this interactional event, the role of emotions in the human constitution is perceptible. As explained by Wallon (1975, p. 135), “in fact, affective or emotional manifestations have a power which is apparently so essential that their effects are among the first signs of psychic life observable in the infant”. Furthermore, it is “in this exchange of looks, caresses and warmth that affective bonds begin to form” (SEIDL-DE-MOURA; RIBAS, 2012, p. 41). Thus, we risk inferring that, in this event, an affective relationship between Giulia and Ícaro, which had previously been established, was consolidated. Regardless of the fact that he was a big baby and that he made other babies cry and the teachers warned him, Giulia approached him and offered him a hug.

In the third event, we noticed a situation in which the lived experiences that occurred through the hug make Ícaro change. This baby, who needed to be watched and warned by the adults so that his approaches were careful, in this event, which also took place on 11/16/2017, is willing to take care of Giulia.

Following the scene, after Ícaro wakes up, the babies drink milk, explore soft toys and, later, the books. This dynamic continues until the teachers offer other cultural artifacts to the small children: real saucepans, cans, spoons and plastic pots for the them to make “food”, as a game that had already featured in the class. The teachers remain seated next to the children, while the babies examine the objects. The assistant is focused on bathing Mariana, one of the babies in the investigated group. At the end of the bath, the assistant sits next to the children. Ícaro examines a pot and spoon next to the teacher. Giulia approaches the teacher, takes some objects from the mat and puts them inside a can. The teacher gets up to take Murilo to change his diaper. At that moment, the other teacher also gets up, but remains in the stimulation room, maintaining a distance from the babies.

Next, Ícaro looks at the objects he holds in his hands, perhaps paying attention to the images printed on the label of the pot he holds. Some babies hit the artifacts on the floor and observe the sound emitted, while others put the spoons in their own mouths. Following this, Ícaro looks at Giulia, sitting next to her, and examines the pot, stirring the spoon inside the artifact. Ícaro moves the spoon he holds towards Giulia’s mouth, offering “food” to the baby. However, Giulia, who was also examining the objects she held in her hands, did not notice Ícaro’s gesture. Then, Ícaro, who has kept with his arm outstretched towards Giulia, says: “papá” (food). Giulia looks at Ícaro and opens her mouth for him to put the “food” in (Figure 3, frame 3). He takes the spoon out of Giulia’s mouth, stirs the pot again and puts the spoon in his own mouth.

Following this, after once again stirring the spoon inside the pot, he offers the “food” to Giulia and she again opens her mouth towards the spoon that Ícaro holds in his hands. However, the teacher approaches and says: “Ícaro, be careful, see. Slowly, Ícaro.” She then touches the child’s hand. The teacher approaches the assistant and asks her to “keep an eye over there”, that is, towards the babies Giulia and Ícaro. The assistant confirms

yes, nodding in the affirmative. Giulia makes eye contact with Ícaro. The baby also looks at Giulia, examines the objects in her hands but does not offer her “food” again.

In this event, we recognized that babies, in their peculiar way, communicate through verbal and non-verbal language. In this, and in other relationships established in the context of the nursery, we noticed that the look is configured as a central element in the perception of the other and in the establishment of a dialogue with the other. A look directed at the partner is a process of recognition between both of them for performing a certain action. For Le Breton (2009, p. 224), the look consists of conferring value on the relationship, since “the look is in solidarity with the way of being before the other”. In our investigation, we identified the presence of the expressions of looking, smiling, movements and gestures. Staring at the other, moving to meet them, touching, smiling as a sign of contentment, and gesturing to the other are interactive actions used by babies in the composition of relationships.

As we analyze this event, we observe that Ícaro remained focused on the artifacts held in his hands, as well as on Giulia. This fact indicates that he understood both the baby and himself as agents in the constitution of relational ties and, in this way, he made “active choices among the behavioral means available to achieve those goals, which includes actively choosing what to pay attention to in the pursuit of these goals” (TOMASELLO, 2003, p. 94). In other words, Ícaro outlined an objective and selected, among his expressive forms, a means to reach it.

In addition to looking, our protagonist made use of verbal language. The word “papa” (food), spoken by Ícaro, produces meanings and leads Giulia and Ícaro to the establishment of a game. The language

Has different forms and is present in different species of the animal kingdom. Speech, however, is a specific human language. The world and its heritage are communicated and transmitted, to each generation, especially by the power of speech. The meaning of the words ensures the unity of this communication, through which the subjects are continually constituting themselves and being constituted as human beings (OLIVEIRA; GOMES, 2017, p. 8).

In addition, it is worth considering that playing at offering “food” can be thought of as a process of imitation. It is an instrument that allows children to learn something from others. In the course of this event, we observed the babies imitating the adults in the moments intended for feeding, that is, situations they experienced constantly. The gesture of directing the spoon to the mouth and the utterance “papa” (food) produce meanings that culminate in the movement of opening the mouth to accept the “food” offered. This reveals that imitation is configured as a potentializing element for learning and development. Oliveira (1997) explains that, for Vygotsky, imitation:

Is not a mere copy of a model, but an individual reconstruction of what is observed in others. This reconstruction is based on the psychological possibilities

of the child who performs the imitation and constitutes, for them, the creation of something new from what they observe in the other. Vygotsky does not consider the imitative activity, therefore, as a mechanical process, but as an opportunity for the child to perform actions that are beyond their own capabilities, which would contribute to their development (OLIVEIRA, 1997, p. 63).

We also note other examples of imitative approaches by children during the construction of empirical material. While one baby explored the materials, another watched carefully and tried to perform the same action. To exemplify, at the time of feeding, one of the babies tapped the palm of their hand on the feeding chair tray; the sound emitted caught the attention of the other babies who also started to hit and have fun with this action.

Returning to the event of the offer of “food”, we also see that the intervention carried out by the teacher demonstrates that she observes the relationship established between Giulia and Ícaro from a distance and intervenes, possibly trying to prevent the possibility of generating conflict. This fact makes us reflect on some questions. Do we respect the unfolding of the children’s interactive dynamics or do we perform interventions presupposing some conflict? Do we recognize that babies can be considered as active and capable participants when developing their relationships? Such problems reveal the position that adults exercise in relation to children when signifying the relationships of babies in the collective space, in addition to indicating that the relationships established between adults and children are permeated by the teacher’s conceptions of children. Tristão (2004) considers that the creation of favorable scenarios for the relationships of the babies and the way to intervene comes from the

[...] expectations that the teacher has about the student, expectations regarding sex, social class, disability, family. This goes for babies, for children and even for adults – how much do I, a teacher, believe in this person in front of me? In this way, the conception of childhood and children that the teachers construct determines their practices. This way of seeing is built on a day-to-day basis, and it certainly has assumptions based on the philosophical, sociological and psychological conceptions that are behind the work of each teacher, however, it is in everyday life, together with children, that it is revealed. When working with children, we can see what the teachers think about that group (TRISTÃO, 2004, p. 117).

This means that there will be different ways for teachers to relate to babies: from those who see them as passive to others who believe in the potential of small children to relate to others and the social environment. In the nursery, the teachers demonstrated that they believed in babies’ ability to express themselves and constitute their social relationships based on their own initiatives. However, the former were always attentive, especially when it came to Ícaro. Thus, the dialectical unity [autonomy/protection]

(CORTEZZI, 2020; CORTEZZI *et al*, 2022) also makes these tensions visible in the EMEI Ciranda nursery. The tensions between letting the interactions established between the babies develop, as in the moment of the hug, or intervening on the assumption of possible conflicts are always present and are constitutive parts of the dynamics of the collective space of education and care.

In addition, our analysis reflect the role that Ícaro himself assumes and plays, in some way, behaving like a big baby who demands care in his approaches. The teacher's intervention reaffirms this position and, perhaps, made Ícaro look at Giulia, but not seek to relate to her again. He immediately reconfigured his actions, exploring the objects in his hands and demonstrating that he was paying attention to his surroundings. This role tells us about the meanings apprehended and the life experiences (*perezhivanie*) constructed by Ícaro that allowed the baby to evaluate his approach. For Vygotsky (1932-1933/1996),

[...] the lived experience reflects, on the one hand, the environment in its relationship with me and the way I live it and, on the other hand, the peculiarities of the development of my own "I" are manifested. In my lived experience, to a certain extent, all my properties that were formed throughout my development at a given moment are manifested (VYGOTSKY, 1932-1933/ 1996, p. 383. Our translation<sup>5</sup>).

We cannot say whether Ícaro experienced any situation that limited or prevented him from resuming the game with Giulia. However, what should be emphasized at this moment is the relationship established between the babies. Even though Ícaro was considered a big baby and his approaches required care, he was willing to take care of Giulia, offering "food" to the baby.

In the analyzed events, we noticed that the interactional dynamics between the babies unfolds momentarily. However, we observe, on the other hand, how these few minutes in the lives of babies – and in our lives, in general – have the potential to transform the lived experience (*perezhivanie*) of the group of children. It is in these details and in these fleeting moments that the life of the human being is woven.

When carrying out the analysis of these three events of Ícaro and Giulia in the nursery, we observed that the lived experiences (*perezhivanie*) go beyond the walls of the educational institution. Ícaro is the result of an aggregation of relationships, meanings and experienced situations, just like Giulia and all the other children and adults belonging to that group. During the investigation, we noticed the numerous comments and observations of the adults that demarcated how Ícaro was perceived in

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<sup>5</sup> En la vivencia se refleja, por una parte, el médio en su relación conmigo y el modo que lo vivo y, por otra, se ponen de manifiesto las peculiaridades del desarrollo de mi propio "yo". En mi vivencia se manifiestan en qué medida participan todas mis propiedades que se han formado a lo largo de mi desarrollo en um momento determinado.

that social environment: “Ícaro, be careful, see. Be nice with a classmate”; “Oh, Ícaro, you are very strong”. Giulia, on the other hand, was one of the smallest children in the researched group and yet, as was observed in the first event, she demonstrated support for Ícaro’s established approach, since she did not cry when the little boy walked over her. Furthermore, in the second event, we noted that she starts the approach and tries to give Ícaro a hug. Finally, in the third interactional event, he recognizes the baby as a partner who showed that she accepted him and supported the relationship, and thus he seeks to take care of Giulia by offering her “food” during the game.

Furthermore, we observed that the small children communicate with others through their multiple languages: looks, smiles, cries, bites, facial expressions, babbles, movements, gestures, dance steps and touches. It is also worth mentioning the hug offered after waking up and offering “food” as a gesture of care given to their classmates.

Finally, our analyzes revealed the richness of the lived experiences (*perezhivanie*) and how much they can tell us about how children constitute themselves as humans in this collective space.

## Final considerations

For the development of the study, support was sought in the dialogue between Historical-Cultural Theory and Ethnography in Education, in order to reveal the daily life of the nursery and learn about the babies’ lives in this space. The theoretical-methodological tools used provided participant observation and a detailed description of the development of the babies’ social relationships in this scenario. Such theoretical-methodological dialogue proved to be particularly fruitful in the research carried out on babies, since merely listening to the adults who live with them, through interviews, would not be enough to reveal the complexity of the analyzed lived experiences.

The analyzes which were carried out reveal (i) the attractive force of cultural artifacts; (ii) the diversity of activities listed in the routine, the elements of notable importance in the promotion of the babies’ relationships and in the expansion of the cultural universe of the small children; (iii) the great value in the relationship with the teachers; (iv) the fleeting nature of children’s interactive dynamics, that is, the methods used by babies to get closer to each other (baby and/or adult) and perform a certain action together.

We found that babies communicate through different languages and we recognized the lived experiences constituted by children in their social relationships. Furthermore, we identified a representative history of the investigated group - the genesis of a relationship between Ícaro and Giulia. The two children were chosen as the main characters to represent the other babies and, with that, we learned of the lived experiences constituted in the context of the nursery, in addition to apprehending the meanings that the small children produced during the composition of their relationships. Thus, we

understand that it is both through the relationships established with the other as well as cultural appropriation that, in fact, we become human. On the other hand, lived experiences (*perezhivanie*) provide transformations in our development in multiple circumstances. In addition, the development process of Ícaro is as an example of the progress provided in the collective space of education and care (SILVA, 2018).

In addition, we consider the need for those who work directly with small children to pay attention to the vulnerabilities and potential of babies. When we recognize children's interactional capacity, the importance of relationships for human development and knowledge of lived experiences, we conclude that care is a central element that demarcates the relationships between babies and adults. This care is manifested in different ways: in the organization of both challenging and welcoming spaces, in the offer of different cultural artifacts, in the sensitivity in looking at and listening to the baby, in the intonation of the voice, in encouraging children's discoveries, etc.

As this is a research with an ethnographic approach, owing to the particularities of the group of babies and adults, in the context of the nursery, the conclusions of the study are not universalized, nor are the possibilities exhausted of the existence of other ways of constituting the lived experiences in collective contexts of care and education. Therefore, the relevance of other works in other educational centers remains.

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