

Children in early childhood education: School as a place of social experience

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the experience of children aged four to five years in an early childhood education institution. The category of experience was taken from the theories of François Dubet (1996), Walter Benjamin (1984, 2011a, 2011b), and early childhood social studies (SARMENTO 2002, 2008; CORSARO 2002, 2009, 2011, among others). The case study was conducted in a public early childhood education institution and involved 18 children and two teachers, used audiovisual recordings and notes records in a field diary to capture the children's actions. The children in the institution articulated different logics of action in the relationships with each other and with adults, which were based on the integrative, strategic and subjective dimensions, which are essential to the concept of social experience. The article discusses the need to consider children in the context of relationships regulated by adults when one uses the categories of social action for the study of children's experiences in early childhood education institutions. The analyses present an interpretation of such experiences, which are expressed through both the verbal and body languages of boys and girls. When experiencing the institution, children articulate such experience to their other life experiences, imprinting on them the character of continuity.

Keywords

Children – Early childhood – Early childhood education – Social action – Social experience.

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Crianças na educação infantil: a escola como lugar de experiência social

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Resumo

O artigo apresenta uma análise das experiências de crianças de 4 e 5 anos na instituição de educação infantil. A categoria experiência foi tomada das teorias de François Dubet (1996), Walter Benjamin (1984, 2011a, 2011b) e dos estudos sociais da infância (SARMENTO 2002, 2008; CORSARO 2002, 2009, 2011, dentre outros/as). O estudo de caso foi desenvolvido em uma instituição pública de educação infantil, contou com a participação de dezoito crianças e duas professoras, e utilizou registros em caderno de campo e registros audiovisuais como forma de captar as ações das crianças. Desse modo, identificou-se que as crianças na instituição articulam diversas lógicas de ação nas relações que estabelecem entre si e com os adultos, baseadas nas dimensões integradora, de estratégica e de subjetivação – essenciais à noção de experiência social. O texto discute a necessidade de considerar as crianças no contexto de relações reguladas pelos adultos ao se utilizarem as categorias da ação social para o estudo das experiências vividas pelas crianças nessa instituição escolar. As análises apresentam leitura interpretativa de tais experiências, expressas por meio tanto da linguagem verbal como do que aparece nos corpos dos meninos e das meninas. Verificou-se ainda que, ao vivenciar as experiências na instituição, as crianças o fazem articulando-as a outras experiências de suas vidas, imprimindo-lhes o caráter de continuidade.

Palavras-chave

Crianças – Infância – Educação infantil – Ação social – Experiência social.

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Introduction

A significant increase in the number of studies with children and about their experiences has been observed in the Brazilian literature in the field of education, especially in relation to early childhood education. Such studies express the transformations that have occurred in public policy for childhood and children, resulting in an expansion of the coverage of educational services for children between the ages of zero and five, which is considered a space for the investigation of children and adults interactions, and among children themselves. Simultaneously, a movement within the social sciences has emerged in which the expression of different social actors is considered a prerequisite for the effective understanding of social life and individual and collective experiences.

The development of sociologically oriented research, studies on early childhood education in Brazil have focused on innumerable aspects, including different actors and perspectives of experiences in the care and educational environment of zero to five year old children. The consideration of children as actors is a result of social processes that have transformed the ways in which children and early childhood (in a plural way) are understood, expressed in the production of knowledge concerning society and schools. This transformation is also a result of an effort to overcome the invisibility of children as social actors (SARMENTO, 2008).

This study¹ analyzes the daily experiences of children aged four to five years old in a public early childhood education institution². The analyses presented here are theoretically

1- This article was based on research conducted for one of the author's Master's thesis, defended in August 2013, entitled: "*A gente vem brincar, colorir e até fazer atividade*": a perspectiva das crianças sobre a experiência de frequentar uma instituição de Educação Infantil ["We come to play, color, and do activities": children's perspective on the experience of attending an Early Childhood Education institution].

2- For this article, we return to the analysis of the data research, expanding the theoretical reference with the inclusion of the social experiment category developed by François Dubet.

grounded in authors from various academic disciplines, such as sociology (DUBET, 1996; DUBET and WIEWIORKA, 1995), the sociology of childhood (SARMENTO and PINTO, 1997; CORSARO, 2002, 2009, 2011; among others), philosophy (BENJAMIN, 1984, 2011a, 2011b; among others) and early childhood education (CAMPOS, 2008; ROCHA, 2008; SILVA and VIEIRA, 2008; among others).

A case study method (SARMENTO, 2003) was used, and the following were the main methodological procedures: participant observation, drawings combined with speech, photographs produced by the children (also combined with their speech), recordings of children's speech in informal moments and in interviews, and fieldnotes.

The data obtained using different research methods were compared with the objective of constructing a dense description (GEERTZ, 2008) of children's experiences in the early childhood education institution. The data were systematically compared because, methodologically, in studies with children, it is necessary to employ various listening tools combined with different media to create opportunities for children to express their needs, interpretations, and meanings of their experiences using different languages, as suggested by Rocha (2008).

Data were collected over seven months in 2012 in a municipal unit of early childhood education (Unidade Municipal de Educação Infantil - UMEI) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The study's participants were 18 children aged four to five years old (eight girls and ten boys) in addition to the two teachers who worked daily with this group. Only one child had attended the institution since nursery, whereas all the others were experiencing their first year at the Rosa dos Ventos UMEI.

For ethical reasons, the name of the institution was changed to a fictitious name chosen by the institution's staff. The same ethical procedure was adopted for the participants. The fictitious names were negotiated with the

teachers and with the children so that each one could suggest the name with which they would be identified in this study. In the case of the children, this process occurred in two ways: one group easily accepted the fictitious name proposal and suggested names without our interference. In this group, the children adopted the names of parents and/or relatives and family members who were close to them. For a small group of children, we offered help with the choice, suggesting to them that they choose pseudonyms that begin with the first letter of their respective names (this procedure was followed by an explanation that whenever the chosen name appeared in the study, it corresponded to the child in question). After the children's pseudonyms were chosen, they were told to their parents³ in the closing meeting at the end of the first semester of 2012.

Building an alternative view of the early childhood experience

The study of early childhood experience – different from but not lesser than that of adults (BENJAMIN, 1984) – requires discarding the idea that children are social beings who participate minimally in their own socialization process. For Sarmento and Pinto (1997, p. 20), the consideration of children as social actors implies the recognition of “children’s capacity for symbolic production and the constitution of their representations and beliefs in organized systems, i.e., in cultures.” Thus, we consider that, in the context of the relationships between children and adults (intergenerational) and among children (intragenerational), children are active beings, i.e., they possess agency. They are remarkably interactive, especially in the relationships established with other children in the social environments they share,

thus establishing individual cultures known as peer cultures (CORSARO, 2009).

Corsaro (2009) asserts that children creatively assimilate information from the adult world to build unique cultures. According to this author, childhood peer cultures are understood as “a set of activities or routines, devices, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interactions with their peers” (CORSARO, 2009, p. 32). Corsaro developed an approach to childhood socialization that considers the social action of children in this process to be more interactive than passive or merely reproductive, coining the term *interpretive reproduction* (CORSARO, 2002; 2009; 2011):

The term *interpretive* captures the innovative aspects of children’s participation in society, indicating the fact that the children create and participate in their unique peer cultures through the appropriation of information from the adult world to meet their own interests as children. The term *reproduction* signifies that the children not only internalize culture but actively contribute to production and social change. (CORSARO, 2009, p. 31)

Taking this perspective, children are considered social beings who are immersed early on in a pre-established social network and, by means of communication and language development, build unique modes of understanding reality. By combining this process with the widening of their context of social interactions, children expand their ways of assimilating the world around them, thus expanding peer cultures and reconstructing adult culture (CORSARO, 2002). This perspective leads to the perception of children as competent actors in interactions with other children and with society’s other age groups, and it is through these interactions that they produce cultures that express and, simultaneously, reconstruct their childhood experience.

3- It is important to note another ethical procedure performed in this study: while recognizing the capacity of children to contribute to the research by speaking in their own right (ALDERSON, 2009), we sought permission from parents and family by gathering signed informed consent forms.

Because this study was conducted in an educational institution and sought to understand children's perspective in relation to their own experiences in this environment, we consider it appropriate to adhere to the concept of experience in the domain of contemporary sociology, particularly in the way the concept is articulated in the studies of François Dubet. The sociology of experience is strongly based on the sociology of action of Alain Touraine, the author to whom sociologists of early childhood in the Francophone tradition owe the concept of the social action of children.

As has been widely disseminated, the social childhood studies that were conducted in the last quarter of the twentieth century, despite their different approaches – some focusing on the structural dimension of childhood in societies (macrosociological studies) and some focusing on the experiences (actions) of children (interpretive studies) in different spaces – had the objective of overcoming the sociological approaches that focused on children as the object of the socializing actions of adults and therefore as a secondary element in fields of study such as the sociology of family and sociology of education (SIROTA, 2001; SARMENTO, 2008). Approaches to childhood as a structural category of social life and to the child as having an active role in social structures and relations generally run counter to the classical notion of socialization that expresses not only the asymmetry but also the denial that the worlds of children have meanings and significances that must be asked of them (CAMPOS, 2008; ALDERSON, 2009). In other words, children are the actors of experiences and actions – a view that is widespread among authors of social childhood studies but little discussed and problematized within general sociology. To attribute to children the capacity for social action, as has been widely accepted by childhood sociologists and researchers in the educational field, means considering that children construct subjective meanings in the concrete actions they undertake (COHN, 1982). In this sense, it is considered that children act in social relations in which their actions are

regulated by a system of common norms that make it possible for various actors to recognize them as valid (LADRIERE, 1971). Our inquiries, constructed in dialogue with the sociological field of action and by means of observation of children and their relations with each other and with adults, allowed us to identify *experiences* in the sense of the *work* performed by children in their own process of development and construction of these relations, with consequences for themselves, the other children, and the adults. However, we seek to understand them without ignoring the asymmetry between adults and children in educational institutions and in society as a whole, especially as it maintains the responsibility of adults for future generations.

In this sense, the concept of social experience, such as the one that seeks, according to Dubet (1996), a mid-range theory that does not aim to find explanations that cover the entirety of social situations – but that also does not rely on the partial dimensions of the relationship between the actor and the system – seems useful to us to understand what was observed and heard in the period of contact with children in an early childhood educational institution. In the construction of this concept, Dubet proposes a theorization that does not completely abandon the ambitions of classical sociology and that, simultaneously, assumes that the subsequent elaborations that sought to explain social actions and their relations with the system are insufficient. For the author, the notion of experience is the

least inadequate to describe the nature of the object that is found in some empirical studies in which social conducts do not appear reducible to pure applications of internalized codes or chains of strategic choices that make action a series of rational decisions. (DUBET, 1996, p. 93)

As Dubet defines it, a key element of this theory is that with social experience, as the articulation of different logics (sometimes

contradictory) present in the social systems of contemporary societies, the actor is not completely socialized. In this statement, the author means to say that in complex contemporary societies, actions occur as choices proffered by this same system, which is expressed in multiple ways, not just as a project of integration to be achieved by the socialization of its members. Integration, as a design of classical sociology, especially that developed by Durkheim and Parsons, would still be present in every society, without which there would be no possibility of identity constitution, be it collective or individual. Contemporary formulations developed in the face of the inability of classical thought to offer explanations for the problems of “post-industrial” societies, according to Dubet, exhibit biased views of the relationship between actor, social action, and the system.

In the construction of the concept of social experience, Dubet (1996) goes on to consider, in addition to the classical paradigm, namely, that of social action as integration, two currents of contemporary thought: the paradigm of communication, in which action is interaction and language, and the paradigm of rationality, in which action is strategy and utility.

In the classical paradigm, actor and system are merged by means of the idea of roles and socialization, the latter being subdivided into primary socialization and secondary socialization. Accordingly, the social system or society expresses the unity of processes of identity, of competitions and of culture, articulated by the nation-state. This is also the reason why sociology rises against the idea of the subject, to the extent to which each individual constitutes a subjective version of the social system to which he or she belongs. It is through socialization that society becomes a second nature for each of the individuals in a group, ensuring the integration of each into the system. For Dubet, in contemporary societies, this unity is broken. Individuals identify themselves by different forms of belonging,

which makes it necessary to introduce duality where classical sociology placed the unity of structure and history (DUBET and WIEWIORKA, 1995; DUBET, 1996). However, he asserts that the integrative dimension, in addition to other logics, coexists in contemporary social systems, no longer as a definition of the individual and of the system, but instead as their logics in which the subjects operate in different circumstances.

What the author calls the logic of strategy refers to the situation in which the actors find themselves in competitive conditions, acting and explaining their actions in this regard. It is the expression of the social system as a competitive field in which actors assess their possibilities of influencing others and ensuring the satisfaction of their own interests. This logic operates both in the economic field, in which society is viewed as a market, and in the political field, in which the struggle for power and recognition guides the actions of individuals and groups.

The logic of “subjectification”, in turn, expresses the distance that the actors can move away from the social system through critical activity, through reflection that reveals that they are neither reducible to roles nor operate solely on account of their interests, adopting a different perspective from that of the logics of integration and strategy. Their possibilities of expression are directly related to the degree of freedom present in the social system that will allow a certain degree of detachment from oneself and from society, in a critical and reflective activity. These possibilities, which the author calls the logic of “subjectification” or the logic of the subject, always occur in opposition to (in tension with) the logics of integration and strategy.

For Dubet, each approach is related to a dimension of the *system* and a dimension of the *action*, with which he associates the logics present in contemporary societies. He views the system as plural, encompassing these dimensions as if they are heterogeneous but not hierarchical. This heterogeneity of mechanisms that determines the logics of action is what

allows one to be an actor (and not only an agent). This is because there is no central principle that unifies author and system (such as the internalization of the social by the actor, in the classical notion), and if the system is viewed according to different dimensions, the actor it produces is required to construct a coherence of experience and a capacity to act. For Dubet, because complex societies identities are not provided by tradition, there is a free space that allows the actor to move away from other logics – those of integration and of interest – and exercise criticism, to build something that does not fit in any of them, which constitutes the space of “subjectification”.

For Dubet, the social experience is the work of the actor in articulating the logics present in the system, and it requires of the analyst a phenomenological approach because there is no *a priori*, as can be assumed of a logic of the roles that merge actor and social system. On the contrary, experience is the *work of the actor*.

Seeking an approach in which the experiences of children in an early childhood educational institution were taken from the perspectives of the boys and girls themselves, we considered it possible to think in terms of the articulation of logics that the school (as a system of action of children and of adults), although regulated by the age group of the adults, offers, given that it is part of the larger social system that contains a variety of logics, as discussed above. We consider it relevant, however, not to perform a direct and mechanical implementation of this theoretical approach to the sociological study of children. On the one hand, the school does not simply reflect (although it reproduces them in many ways) the logics as they are in the social system in which it operates. On the other hand, it is important to consider that we are dealing with young children in the initial phase of school attendance. The theory of social experience, as constructed by Dubet, expresses sociological thinking in which the actor is an adult subject, one who not only ensures the functioning of society but also struggles for power and recognition

and exercises (or can exercise) critical thinking, as discussed above. The first caveat to be made concerning a direct implementation of the theory (which includes the analysis that, although they do not mobilize the idea of logical action, children are defined as a social actors) for the analysis of the experiences of children has to do with the fact that the school is an institution that values the integrative dimension – though not exclusively – of offering a set of experiences and knowledge that constitutes the basic training for individuals in our society. Thus, the regulations exercised in the school, from the laws and norms that establish it to those that hold the adults responsible for the daily processes that occur there, are considered by us as a condition in which the experiences of adults and children occur during everyday school life. Moreover, we do not consider it relevant to transpose to the children’s action the notion of social action as developed for adult subjects, anchored in the cognitive dimension, in the ability of verbal expression and in the responsibility for their own actions. We believe that the expressions *social actor* and *social experience* should qualify the autonomy inherent to children (even if it is only in relation to adults). With regard to the idea of social experience developed here, it should also be noted that, for Dubet, the preferred way of understanding social experiences is through discourse, to the extent that subjects tend to explain and to expose their views according to the meanings of their actions, thus expressing the logic they applied in certain situations. We do not believe this to be the case for children’s actions. If, on the one hand, we conceive children as powerful, as capable of affecting the relationship environments in which they find themselves from their own perspective, then on the other hand, we view them in their complex universe of relations with other children and adults and within institutional regulations, in this case, school regulations.

Thus, for the analyses of the experiences of children in the school environment, we share with scholars of childhood studies the criticism that sociology excludes children from theoretical

thinking about social life and society, addressing them secondarily in studies on institutions, especially the family and the school. Additionally, we argue that children participate actively in their own socialization process, in a relational context among peers characterized by norms, codes, and practices that, although conditioned by the general culture and the broader system of action, encompass what has been considered a *culture of early childhood* or *peer culture*. Moreover, being children, they find themselves in an early stage of the human development process (physical, emotional, social, cultural, and cognitive) in which verbal language is not the preferred form of communication and understanding of the world, the other, and themselves. In addition, we consider that the logics of action identified by Dubet for the understanding of social action and subjects (social experience) are lens for capturing the experience of children, but they are not applicable in their entirety, especially with regard to the prevalence of the cognitive dimension either in the articulation between the means and the ends or in the actions of moving away from the roles that subvert the expected in that context. We believe that children experience the environment of early childhood education (and the others in which they participate) completely, simultaneously mobilizing the cognitive, emotional, and motor dimensions in relationships and in their interpretations of situations.

With this perspective, we consider it necessary to mobilize other approaches to the experience of children because, in this phase of life, the forms of expression and of being touched by what occurs within their environments involve a corporeal dimension (COUTINHO, 2012; BUSS-SIMÃO, 2012). In addition, although the notion of social experience indicates that actions cannot be reduced to roles and interactions (present, but insufficient, paradigms), there are elements and forms of expression of the experience of children that overcome the idea of the logic of action, necessitating the reading of body language.

Another aspect that presented itself to us quite strongly was children's mobilization of

situations, stories, and narratives outside of the school environment, composing a continuum that we sought to understand by means of the notions of experience developed by Walter Benjamin (1984; 2011a; 2011b).

Benjamin (1984) developed a theory that helps us distinguish between the experience of elders (that, according to this author, is on a path to extinction) and that of children. For Benjamin, repetition has a fundamental importance in the childhood experience: "repetition is the soul of play, nothing gives [the child] greater pleasure than one more time" (BENJAMIN, 1984, p. 74). Therefore, while the adult narrates his or her experience successfully, the child, by repeating the event experienced, recreates it incessantly and intensely: "The adult, upon narrating an experience, frees his or her heart of horrors and enjoys happiness again. The child returns to the experienced lived and starts again from the beginning" (BENJAMIN, 1984, p. 75). Benjamin argues that "any and all deeper experience desires insatiably until the end of all things, repetition, and return, restoring a primordial situation from which the impulse first came" (BENJAMIN, 1984, 74-75).

Moreover, Benjaminian thought emphasizes the existing relationship between experience and the narrative act. The author states that, currently, narration is increasingly scarce as a result of the paucity of experiences. Benjamin understands that the act of narration is a collective process that requires exchange among participants.

For Machado (2010), the child shares social life with the adult but in a particular way of being and living in the world. The child possesses non-representational forms of living his or her experiences; therefore, children adhere (corporeally) to the situations they experience. There exists in the experience of the child, as Machado states, "an 'adherence to situations' that impedes her from representing the world: she does not represent it, she lives it" (MACHADO, 2010, p. 128). According to the author:

The child is a being-in-the-world permeated with limitations given by the immaturity of her body and the framework offered in the contact with the culture around her about what is allowed or not for a child there. However, she is a person able to say something about all this from the earliest age: she says something with her body, gestures, shouts, cries, expressions of joy and dismay, amazement, and submission. These sayings in action, these actions in the body, show themselves full of theatricality: small, medium, and large performances, actions of their daily lives that embody cultural forms in the full being of the child; actions visible and also invisible to adult eyes. (MACHADO, 2010, p. 126)

This approach allows the body of children to be perceived as a *locus* of the “subjective experience lived,” as Coutinho (2012) suggests. This author, in analyzing the actions of babies in a day care center, proposes that the concept of the body as lived subjective experience “requires approximation to their bodily manifestations” (COUTINHO, 2012, p. 246). The author likewise stresses that “[...] children use the body to communicate, to interact, to experiment, and do so intentionally” (COUTINHO, 2012, p. 251).

Thus, in the investigative environment, continuity, adherence to situations, and corporeal expression, together with the work of articulating different possibilities (logics of actions), were essential categories for the perception and analysis of the experiences lived by children within the early childhood educational institution.

Understanding the logics that orient the action (and the experience) of children

As stated above, in the early childhood educational institution, the integrative, strategic, and subjective dimensions – essential for the notion of social experience (DUBET,

1996) – are present. The relationships that occur in this educational context are regulated by the adults even as they are simultaneously managed by the decisions made by the children themselves in accordance with the situations that occur or are triggered by them.

In Brazil, children between zero and five years of age attend to early childhood education schools (which is the first stage of the Brazilian Educational System) with specific characteristics, where the dimensions of playing and care are present in its regulation – and, to some extent, in the professional culture that has been developed. Furthermore, as observed by contemporary sociology, in complex societies, it is no longer possible to speak of a fully socialized individual, even when referring to adults. In the case of children, this dimension of the non-socialized individual is inherent to the early childhood condition, which means that, combined with the characteristics of this stage of education, the role of the student (or the profession of student) is absent or weakly present. Nonetheless, in the experience of these children, a variety of rites, temporalities, and rules unique to the educational environment are present.

From the children’s perspective, as expressed in their productions (drawings and photographs) and in their speech, the UMEI is perceived as a space that introduces them to schooling and that, therefore, works toward (even if in a somewhat non systematic way) the construction of the profession of student. Accordingly, the UMEI is a space of schooling learning that has as its main task initiating/introducing the children to the school universe. This statement becomes more apparent in the words of some of the children:

“I come [to the school] to write, play, and draw; these things.” (Marcelo – 08/05/2012)
“Ah, writing, activities, and playing in one of the playgrounds. Playing is in the playground. The other things we do in the classroom.” (Ana – 08/05/2012)

“Studying! Learning things... playing!
There are lots of toys here!” (Maria Clara
– 08/06/2012)

situations they experienced in the institution, such as “writing,” “activities,” and “learning,” predominate over other experiences, such as playing and drawing. The same predominance also appears in the drawings and photographs that they produced:

Figures 1 and 2- Photos taken by Gabriel



Source: research datas.

Researcher: Gabriel, of the things that you photographed here in the UMEI, which are the ones that you like the most?

Gabriel: Studying!

Researcher: And what do you study?

Gabriel: I learn the letters, writing, drawing, I learn the numbers! (09/06/2012)

Figure 3- Maria Clara draws “Me and my friends at the UMEI”



Researcher: Tell me about your drawing!

Maria Clara: This is me, and the other one is Ana!

Researcher: And what are you two doing?

Maria Clara: Writing our names!

Researcher: And what do you like most about the UMEI?

Maria Clara: Activities! (07/03/2012)

Source: research datas.

If, on the one hand, the institution is perceived by the children as a space that aims to initiate them into a schooling universe, then on the other hand, they demonstrate that, at the UMEI, they can also relate socially with other children, as captured in some examples of their speech:

“We come and stay inside of there. Inside our classroom! It has toys for us, and

I play with my classmates!” (Marcelo
– 08/05/2012)

“I come to play with the toys! I also like to play puppy with my classmates! We play with the cars. We like this better!” (Márcio
– 08/05/2012)

“In Ms. Bruna’s classroom. There, we read books, play with friends!” (Guilherme
– 08/06/2012)

“We come to play! We play in the playground, hide and seek!” (Patricia – 08/06/2012)

The photographs produced by our interlocutors also shed light on this assertion about the relationship among children in the class:

Figure 4- Photo taken by Marcelo



Source: research datas.

Researcher: And who are the people that you said you photographed and that you like?
Marcelo: All my classmates, but I like João, Ana, Paula Beatriz, and Gabriel better!

The majority of the social relationships experienced by the children with their peers occur in the classroom, which is not to say that other relationships among peers do not occur in other spaces of the institution:

Figure 5- Brenda draws the people at the UMEI whom she likes best



Source: research datas.

Brenda: Take it, Sandro, I've finished.
Researcher: What have you drawn, Brenda?
Brenda: This is Ms. Bruna, this is me, and here is Ana, Jéssica, and Carina.
Researcher: Where are you?
Brenda: In the video room, playing the ball and cloth game.

This notion that the early childhood educational institution is space/time and is an environment where the children can meet with their peers goes beyond the level of the relationships between the children in the same classroom and expands to the social relations experienced with children from other classrooms.

In the institution where the study was conducted, the teachers' practices incorporate elements in which children's action and freedom are valuable in the context of an educational project that goes beyond the transmission of content, focusing on what has been called development of children in the different dimensions of human being: social, cultural, emotional, motor, and cognitive. The following episode illustrates this situation:

The children are creating a card for Mother's Day. The teacher, Ms. Bruna, planned the activity in two stages: first, the children would finger paint a heart, and, after the card (which had the shape of a heart) had dried, it would be glued into a folded flower shape suspended from a popsicle stick. As they had begun to disperse, the teacher, after negotiating with the class, stops the activity and suggests that the children should choose some toys while the paint was drying on the cards. Ana then asks the teacher:

- Ms. Bruna? I don't wanna play now! I want it all!
- The teacher looks at the girl and, without understanding, asks:
 - What do you mean? All what?
 - All, Ms. Bruna! I want to finish the card!
 - The teacher then let the girl finish the preparation of her card.

Ana sat alone for approximately twenty-five minutes finishing her card while the other children in the class were playing freely around the classroom, even after the teacher explained that, after the play time, all of them would finish their cards. The girl refused the numerous invitations of her classmates, who insisted on calling her to play. Ana remained seated and focused on making her card. (Fieldnotes, 05/11/2012)

Ana's action seems to show her total involvement with the situation most likely because she was creating an object/artifact loaded with affection. At that moment, the child proposed and experienced isolation from the group. Her entire body was involved in the activity – in the creation of the card – which most likely was linked to a possible later experience to be played out at the time of giving the card to her mother. Adding the time of completion of the first phase of the activity (when all the children participated, which lasted approximately 25 minutes) and the time that the girl sat alone concentrating on making her card (which was approximately 25 minutes) totaled approximately 50 minutes. This contradicts the collective belief present in early childhood educational institutions that children have poor concentration and that activities, therefore, must be fast ones.

Figure 6- The teacher allows Ana to finish her card while the other children play.



Source: Extracted from the fieldwork films.

Figure 7- Ana finishes her card alone while the other children play.



Source: Extracted from the fieldwork films.

In this activity, Ana was not the only child to construct her own logic for her actions. Marcus, in his own way, also expressed engagement in the activity and in the possible later experience of giving the card to his mother:

Marcus finished creating the first part of his card and, at the request of the teacher, went to play so that his painting could dry and he could return to finish the card. At the toy box, the boy picks up a telephone that was there for the children's use and initiates a (make-believe) conversation with his mother:

– Hello, mom? I am making a card for you!
When I arrive, I will give it to you, OK?
Bye, kiss. (Fieldnotes – 05/11/2012)

Both Ana and Marcus demonstrated through their actions, each in their own way, the emotions of creating a card for their mothers. Most likely, an emotional involvement at the time that the card was being created allowed greater dedication to the activity, as the experience could be expanded upon in the subsequent experience of delivering the card.

Situations such as those described above, which reveal the possibilities that the children have of articulating different logics of action during a task (DUBET, 1996), are present in early childhood education, in which regulation does not comply with pre-determined programs, thereby making it possible to incorporate shifts into the class's

rhythm that result from the interests and actions of the children. The school studied and the system of action found therein offers space for children's actions to appropriate subjective meanings, at times approaching and at times moving away from those envisaged by the teacher.

We see that the children make strategic choices that put them in situations they desire, not always following the teacher's instructions. The children question the pace and even the content of learning, bringing elements to the classroom scenario that were not only unanticipated by the teacher but that also remained largely unknown to her. These elements take the form of actions of relations among children, with meanings and significances related to childhood subjectivities. However, we understand that the actions in which children's choices – to either remain integrated, fulfilling the “role” of student performing the tasks set forth by the teacher (even when they rely on the participation of the children in the form of suggestions), or to exercise critical thinking and bring elements, including external experiences, to the school setting, strategically circumventing what adults offer them – expresses one of the dimensions of experience or less favored by the forms of the organization of the school routines. In another episode, we see how children construct strategic logics of action in the face of work (in this case, proposed by the teacher) that involves written language appropriation/broadening:

Ms. Bruna begins a game with modeling clay. She asks children to choose a ball of modeling clay, then hands them a popsicle stick and suggests that they create whatever they want.

While children play, the teacher corrects their homework. As soon as she finishes correcting the work, Ms. Bruna interrupts the game of clay: she suggests that each child make the first letter of his or her name. To the ones that could not do it, she suggests that they could make any

letter they please. The large majority of the children were able to construct with clay the first letter of their name and, as soon as they created it, they were challenged by the teacher to choose another letter and shape it in clay. After various constructions, Ms. Bruna challenges the children to shape the first letter of my [the first author's] first name: the letter “S.” Children begin to try and, accordingly, Júlio demonstrates more competence and more creativity in the face of the challenge: he gets up from the table, places the clay on the letter “S” that is on the wall panel, and begins to shape it. After this, the children begin to use this “technique” to construct their letters.

At this moment, the teacher proposes a modification to the activity: she requests that children now put down their clay and, on a sheet of paper, write the letters that have been “sculpted.” All the children perform the activity, and those who did it with ease were encouraged by the teacher to help those who found the task difficult. Paula Beatriz and Ana, after writing the letters of their names, ask me if I would like to see them write the letters of my name. Answering “yes”, the girls then began to drawn the letters of my name on their sheets of paper. (Fieldnotes – 05/14/2012)

Figure 8- Júlio “sculpts” the letter “S” by placing the clay on the classroom wall.



Source: Extracted from the fieldwork films.

In this episode, we observe i) that the children involve themselves (almost totally) in situations that are characterized by playfulness – the teacher begins the activity with modeling clay, a material usually associated with fun, and not directly with the sheet of paper; ii) that the children involve themselves in activities that are challenging (the teacher works gradually to shift the modeling clay game into writing construction); iii) all children get involved in the activity; iv) the intention, on the part of the teacher, of making the activity more meaningful for the children; v) the broadening of the activity on the part of the children (Ana and Paula Beatriz wrote the letters of their own name and asked the researcher if he would like them to write the letters of his name); and vi) the strategies constructed by the group of children to shape the letters that they judged more difficult, such as the letter “S,” which were unforeseen by the teacher.

The recurring idea that the function of this stage of education is to prepare children for schooling in subsequent levels is commonly found in early childhood educational institutions. From this perspective, the so-called “pedagogical” task of the institution has often been understood as a proposition of exercises and activities (on sheets of paper) generally performed mechanically and guided by the practice of instruction, strictly speaking, of the children. We witnessed innumerable situations in which the children involved themselves in distinct ways in situations in which the teacher sought the immersion of the students in the process of the appropriation of written language.

In the episode described above, the action of developing a technique to “shape” the letter “S” constructed by Júlio is appropriated by the other children, who saw in this action the possibility to solve a problem posed by the teacher. Based on the considerations of Dubet (1996), we realize that, according to the complexity of the teacher’s proposal (which shifted gradually from clay shaping to writing practice), the children’s actions occur

as possibilities that are constructed from this same proposal and that are expressed by the children in multiple forms. Thus, the children use the strategy of copying the action of their classmate to find “the means for the intended ends in the opportunities presented by the situation” (DUBET, 1996, p. 123).

The children’s *actions*, however, are much more present the more the environment of the early childhood educational institution (in its relational dimension) provides for and allows their choices. In other words, children’s participation in the situations concerning the construction of their own experiences is conditioned (though not absolutely) by the limits that are set by the adults who organize the relational contexts of education and care.

The complex subtlety that permeates childhood experience

The elements that were captured in the study allowed us to reflect on the complex subtlety present in the children’s experience. The monitoring and analysis of their social experiences indicated that children seek to understand what they experience (or experienced) in their relationships with other children, with adults, and/or with the surrounding cultural world (in its concrete and symbolic aspects). Children’s experience goes beyond the present and mobilizes both past (via memory) and future situations, triggering actions in both individual (personal) and collective (the peer group) realms. Children come to share not only the present experience but also the previous and future ones through play. Thus, the situations – of the children’s experiences – are expanded both temporally and relationally.

Thus, children create their own form of interaction within the peer group based on lived experiences. Childhood experience is differentiated from that of the adult to the extent that children’s experience is characterized by repetition (SARMENTO, 2002), a sort of return

to the fact already lived (BENJAMIN, 1984). In this sense, repetition is one of the characteristics of children's experience.

This repetition derives from children's adhesion to lived circumstances because, according to Machado (2010, p. 128), in the experience of the child, there is an "adherence to situations" in the way that the child does not represent the world but lives it. From this perspective, the child returns to the lived fact to construct (or reconstruct) another way of representing the world (distinct from that of adults). From this perspective, children construct fields of experiences, i.e., domains inside the peer group in which children's social actions emerge and are driven by the experiences (past, present, and future) of one or more children in the group:

The teacher starts circle time with the song "Snake." Children begin to crawl across the floor of the room and, at one point, pile up on top of each other. After singing and playing with the music, Ms. Bruna invites the children to sit down and start the round of conversation. She begins by asking Jonas if he was in pain after hitting his head on the ground. Before the boy answered, Gabriel and Marcus talk again. Marcus says that Gabriel does not know how to play and that he had hurt him at the time the children piled up on top of each other. The teacher attempts to mediate the discussion, ensuring that both have the right to speak. At one point during Marcus's speech, Marcelo stares into the boy's mouth and screams: "YOU HAVE A CAVITY!" From then on, the topic of discussion shifted to illnesses and malaise. Marcelo, when it was his time to speak, commented that when he traveled with his mother, he felt bad and vomited in the bus after eating a cookie. Thereafter, the other children begin to relate some situations in which they vomited. Marcelo then stands up and begins to question the teacher with

his first question: "DO ALL CHILDREN THROW UP?" The teacher asks him to sit back down, and the boy returns to his seat and, not satisfied, after some seconds, gets up again and goes in the direction of the teacher and again asks: "WHY DO PEOPLE THROW UP?" The teacher discusses the subject with the class but does not explore the theme Marcelo proposed more deeply. (Fieldnotes – 05/21/2012)

This episode shows us elements of what we call fields of experience constructed by children in the early childhood educational institution, in which we observe an expansion of one child's experience that triggers reports and other situations in the group. Marcelo standing up and approaching the teacher, combined with his expression of doubt upon asking his questions, reveals the importance of the "vomit" topic for the boy. His questions are expressed in his body language by standing up, walking toward the teacher, and crossing his arms while trying to get an answer (which, in this case, he did not receive).

Marcelo's experience of vomiting on the bus becomes an experience for the group, given that, when the boy inserts the vomiting topic into the conversation, the group topic switches to malaise and illnesses, as revealed in the episode recounted above. The reporting of situations lived at different times and contexts is a frequent occurrence in the school environment observed. In narrating to his teacher and his classmates the fact that the experienced occurred on the trip, Marcelo makes an individual experience become a collective one. At this stage of early childhood education, in which the children have already developed and use oral language as a way not only to communicate but also to elaborate their ideas, they take the place of subjects, in which their experiences are internalized, expressed, and shared with others.

Remembering the nausea causes the boy to mobilize the memory for his narration

during the conversation round. The boy's posture during this episode, as seen in the following photographs, makes his inquiry stronger, indicating that he questions the teacher "in full body."

Figure 9- Marcelo asks the teacher.



Source: (Extracted from the fieldwork films)

Figure 10- Marcelo insists on a response from the teacher.



Source: (Extracted from the fieldwork films)

We perceive that children adjust previous experiences to the ones experienced at the UMEI and also to situations they expect or desire to experience in the future. Children's actions, while giving rise to fields of experience, also result from the combination of experiences. We want to emphasize that the construction of fields of experience based on the children's social actions leads them to construct new actions within the peer group. Our stance is that children combine past experiences and imagined future ones with what they experience in the present. The episode below captures this concept:

Children arrive in the morning and, as is customary, as soon as they enter the

classroom, retrieve their diaries from their backpacks and place them on the teacher's desk. Once they do that, they sit at the tables and play with construction blocks. Ms. Mariane is covering a cardboard box and, therefore, is paying little attention to the children. At that moment, a group of children (Carina, Guilherme, Patricia, and Brenda) who were playing at one of the tables begin a conversation. Patricia begins the dialogue by saying to her classmates:

- "I'm dying to go on vacation! I'm going to travel during vacation!"
- "To where?" - asks Guilherme.
- "I am going to my grandmother's house! It is a lot of fun there! I play a lot. I see my cousins. It is very good!" - Patricia says.
- "My grandmother lives close to home! She is the mother of my father! But no need to travel!" - Brenda adds.
- "My grandmother, too!" - says Guilherme.

Brenda gets up, goes to the toy box, and gets a plastic plate. She returns and asks her friends to line up the chairs so they become a "bus". The other children, when they see the classmates' organization, add new chairs and engage in the game of traveling by bus. The teacher does not see children's organization and continues to cover the cardboard box. (extracted from the fieldwork films (06/08/2012))

The fact that Patricia was "dying to go on vacation" to visit her grandmother's house made the girl remember other times in which she made this trip. This narrative triggers the other children to reflect on the proximity between their homes and those of their grandparents, as exemplified by Brenda when she states: "*My grandmother lives close to home! She is the mother of my father! But no need to travel.*" In both this episode and the one in which Marcelo seeks to ascribe meaning to an experience lived previously, memory and narration are ways through which children transform individual

experience into a collective experience for the group of children.

Brenda, faced with the impossibility of taking a trip to her grandmother's home because it is located near her home, proposes taking the trip in the form of play when she suggests to "play bus". The other children enrich the game when they engage in the action (playing) triggered by the group (Carina, Guilherme, Patrícia, and Brenda). The barrier between the experience of a girl who travels and a girl who does not travel to visit the home of her grandparents is the trigger for the children to build a new storyline for the game because of Brenda's adhesion and that of the other children involved in the episode to the situations (past, present, and future) that they have experienced.

Figure 11- The children conversing about the trip to their grandparents' homes.



Source: (Extracted from the fieldwork films)

Patrícia's experience motivates Brenda to construct a game (traveling by bus to the grandparent's home). The girl organizes the entire environment and only afterward communicates with the other members of the group. Her body language reveals much of the experience, in getting up, searching for a plate in the toy box to serve as a steering wheel, and organizing the chairs to create a bus. Coutinho (2012, p. 242) discusses the importance of considering the bodies of children as sites of verbal inscription, that is, "as a component of social action," and considers the body language of children as a *locus* of subjective lived

experience. Similarly, Buss-Simão (2012, p. 270) emphasizes that "the body is the foundation of all social experience of children and of the construction of their relations."

Final Considerations

Children inside the early childhood educational institution establish a connection with experiences lived outside the institution. This continuity of the experiences lived in the early childhood educational institution with extracurricular experiences can occur both in situations previous to and in possible experiences subsequent to those lived within the UMEI, which denotes its relational and temporal expansion. The situations observed indicate that children strive to extract a deeper sense of their personal experiences.

The children, in the context observed, acted in a way to introduce their interests and questions into the relationships between them and the teachers. Simultaneously, they were guided by their peer's actions and narratives, which indicated that children, in fact, find themselves in the *social relations* in which they construct the meanings of their actions. In this environment, children mobilized affective memory, which includes the desire to express and receive affection, and joyful and painful memories, and through *work* (an essential component of social experience) they inserted these types of memories into the group experience and competently linked them to the logics imposed by the teacher. Thus, they integrated the activities proposed by the teacher and, simultaneously, moved away from the initial goals by giving other meanings to situations.

Thus, we consider that the current movement to understand children less according to their shortcomings than according to their positivity and agency in the social scene resonates with the situations observed and described, as much as one can describe, in adult terms, the early childhood experience. Simultaneously, as much as

we want to emphasize children's agency, it seems important to us to also emphasize institutional constraints, such as the field of adult regulation. By this we mean that when we strongly consider the desire and search for the construction of a democratic school that constitutes a space of expression for children, we recognize that children act – in the strongest sense of the term – and that adults are (along with the other children) the *others* of these actions – after all, they are the ones responsible for them.

We consider that to make it explicit and the understanding children's experience in the early childhood educational environment is important in the process of raising awareness of professionals and researchers of childhood and of early childhood education regarding the alterity of children. This awareness can positively impact the organization and the planning of educational actions centered on children and the particularities involved in their processes of constitution as human beings (BUSS-SIMÃO, 2012).

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