

## THE ROLE PLAY AND THE CHILD WITH AUTISM IN THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT.** This article aims to analyze the play of make-believe for children with autism, focusing on the symbolic resources it uses in asserting roles. It is based on the theoretical contributions of the historical-cultural perspective, with Vygotsky as its main exponent. The research was carried out in a public school of Early Childhood Education, in Brasília. From the microgenetic analysis, the research had six children diagnosed with autism, at the ages of 4 and 6 years, included in Special Class, as participants. The play situations were videotaped and later transcribed in episode format. In the data analysis, we identified two axes, namely: 1) The construction of the role play and; 2) Assumption of roles by the child with autism: set design and imagery resources. The results reveal the role of the other (intentional participation) in the constitution of play activity, especially the role of the adult. In addition, they demonstrate that pedagogical mediation, including the creation of 'scenarios', is fundamental for the extension of the symbolic experience of the child with autism.

**Keywords:** Autism; developmental psychology; playing.

## O JOGO DE PAPÉIS E A CRIANÇA COM AUTISMO NA PERSPECTIVA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL

**RESUMO.** O presente artigo busca analisar o brincar de faz de conta da criança com autismo, com foco nos recursos simbólicos que ela utiliza na assunção de papéis. Este artigo se fundamenta nos aportes teóricos da perspectiva histórico-cultural, tendo Vigotski seu principal expoente. A pesquisa foi realizada numa escola pública de educação infantil, Brasília. Partindo de uma análise microgenética, a investigação contou com a participação de seis crianças com diagnóstico de autismo, com idades entre quatro e seis anos, de uma classe especial. As situações de brincadeira foram videogravadas e posteriormente transcritas em formato de episódios. Na análise dos dados, identificamos dois eixos, a saber: 1) A construção do jogo de papéis e; 2) A assunção de papéis pela criança com autismo: a cenografia e os recursos imagéticos. Os resultados revelam o papel do outro (a participação intencional) na constituição da atividade lúdica, em especial o papel do adulto. Ademais, demonstram que a mediação pedagógica, incluindo a criação de 'cenários', é fundamental para o alargamento da experiência simbólica da criança com o autismo.

**Palavras-chave:** Autismo; psicologia do desenvolvimento; brincar.

## EL JUEGO DE ROLES Y EL NIÑO CON AUTISMO EN LA PERSPECTIVA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL

**RESUMEN.** En este artículo se pretende analizar el juego de hace de cuenta en niño con autismo, centrándose en los recursos simbólicos que utilizan para la asunción de roles. Este artículo se basa en los aportes teóricos de la perspectiva histórico-cultural, con su máximo exponente Vygotsky. La investigación fue realizada en una escuela pública de Educación Infantil, de Brasília. A partir de un análisis micro genético, la investigación contó con la participación de seis niños diagnosticados con autismo, de 4 y 6 años, de una clase especial. Las situaciones lúdicas fueron grabadas y transcritas en formato de episodios. El análisis de los datos identificó dos ejes, a saber: 1) La construcción del juego de rol y; 2) la asunción de roles para el niño con autismo: la escenografía y los recursos pictóricos. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto el papel de la otra (la participación intencional) en la creación de la actividad de juego, especialmente el papel del adulto. Además, muestran que la mediación,

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incluyendo la creación de 'escenarios', es esencial para la ampliación de la experiencia simbólica del niño con autismo.

**Palabras-clave:** Autismo; la psicología del desarrollo; jugar.

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## Introduction

Researchers who study make-believe play seem to agree that this activity is one of the most important in child development. Currently, we observe the expansion of the interest in the theme in several scientific fields; from anthropology to medicine; from art to psychology. However, depending on the area of knowledge, the way of problematizing the issue takes different forms and epistemological affiliations (Brougère, 2008; Kishimoto, 2008; Silva, 2002).

In the field of psychology, regardless of the theoretical perspective, there is a consensus among the theorists about the importance of playing in human development (Brougère, 2008; Vigotski, 2008; Winnicot, 1975). For Winnicot (1975), for example, play is essential for children's emotional development. The author points out that in play the child not only reveals his anguish, anger, anxiety, but learns to understand reality by giving it meaning. Brougère (2008), in turn, understands play as a cultural process. For the author, the play is not innate, but "... a process of inter-individual relations, therefore of culture" (p.97). Thus, play implies a social learning, because we learn to play, playing with others.

The representatives of the historical-cultural perspective, Vigotski (2008), Leontiev (2014) and Elkonin (2009), advance in the arguments of sociogenetic orientation, defending play as a potential activity of development of higher and fundamental functions for the emergence of complex symbolic processes in ontogenesis. It is worth noting that Leontiev (2014) conceptualizes play as the main activity of development in the preschool age, insofar as it guides the child psyche. However, the author argues that this activity is regarded as principal not because of the amount of time the child spends playing, but because of the significant changes generated by it in childhood (Facci, 2006; Leontiev, 2014). In the words of the author: "We call principal activity that activity in connection with which the most important changes in the psychic development of the child occur, and within which psychic processes that prepare the path for the transition of the child to a new and higher level of development are developed" (Leontiev, 2014, p. 122). Thus, for Vygotsky (2007), play is not a mere source of pleasure, but a vital necessity that the child experiences in the process of appropriation of the surrounding universe, namely: the world of culture. Thus, play does not emerge out of nowhere; it is not a natural thing, but a historical and social construct, which reveals a specific way of inserting the child in the culture (Arce & Simão, 2006; Cruz, 2015).

However, play for the authors of the historical-cultural perspective is not restricted to a mere imitative reproduction of culture because it involves the creation of something that is not *naturally* present in the reality lived by the child. In fact, children play because they create and imagine. And part of this creation comes from the relationship they establishes with others who plays with them (play partner) and/or about the others they want to represent in play (the social role staged). In this sense, Elkonin (2009) presents the central thesis of children's play theory (playing social role), namely: "this game is born in the course of the historical development of society as a result of changing the place of the child in the system of social relationships. It is therefore of social origin and nature. Its birth is related to the very concrete social conditions of the child's life in society and not to the action of, innate and internal, instinctive energy of any sort" (p. 80). Elkonin (2009), discussing the origin of play (or, for him, game) in ontogeny, argued that it is only after the formation of sensory-motor coordination for the manipulation of objects that we can speak of play. This coordination is developed as objects are presented by adults (or more experienced partners). For the author, the genesis of make-believe "has a genetic relationship with the formation, oriented by adults, of actions with objects in early childhood" (Elkonin, 2009, p 216).

In this direction, the other (adult or other child) plays a central role in the process of configuring play in the childhood universe, when "attaching meanings to the child's gestures and movements,

interpreting them as play” (Cruz, 2015, p.71) . It is through the mediation of the other that the child internalizes the elements of culture, entering the field of social significations, as said before.

The actions of the adult universe are, in a way, inaccessible to the small child. She wants to be a mother but she cannot; she wants to do the cooking but she cannot; she/he wants to drive but he/she cannot. It is in this logic, or rather, in the conflict between wanting and not being able to participate concretely in the cultural experiences of adults, that child’s play arises (Leontiev, 2014). In cases of children with developmental peculiarities, as is the case of interest in the present work, there are doubts about the symbolic possibilities that they have to play and apprehend reality (Silva, 2017). Specifically about the child with autism, it is important to note that the literature (Kanner, 2012; Rivière, 2004) points out that their play is marked (why not labeled) by the difficulties that, most of the time, are associated with the limitations in symbolization and socio-emotional bond that affects the disorder itself, as we will see below.

### **Playing of the child with autism: the historical-cultural perspective going against the negativity of the disorder**

In the more traditional literature, a reference for a considerable part of the studies on autism, the play is interpreted as an sphere absent of meaning; characterized as something bizarre that is just the execution of repetitive and stereotyped movements (Kanner, 2012; Klinger & Souza, 2015; Rivière, 2004; Williams & Wright, 2008). The main theoretical lines of research on the child with autism (psychoanalyst, behaviorist and cognitivist) discuss their limitations when playing and, consequently, of developing symbolically. The cognitive approach, for example, discusses flaws in the theory of mind, which implies that the child with autism cannot anticipate future reactions from others, nor infer facial or body expressions from the other (Frith, 2015; Williams & Wright, 2008). These elements among so many others would justify, therefore, the difficulty of this child in playing make-believe.

The impediments that demonstrate the difficulties of children with autism in playing are diverse; they range from the problem for the consolidation of the alteritary experience, which would bring an obstacle to role-playing in make-believe, to the aspects related to the delays in language, observed in considerable part of children affected by the disorder. With one or another element being raised to the explanatory basis of a certain type of abnormality in the playing of the child with autism, the fact is that the playful activity of these children is neglected by much of the academic researches (see Silva, 2017).

In contrast to the more traditional and hegemonic trends in the field of psychology, contemporary researchers of historical-cultural perspective have investigated the playful processes in children with autism from a positive bias of the activity, considering the centrality of play to the development of the psyche, (Bagarollo, 2005; Chiote, 2013, 2015; Martins, 2009; Ribas, 2013). In this direction, they argue that the child with autism plays, constructs pivot-objects and presents evidence of role-playing, contradicting classical investigations in psychology.

Bagarollo (2005), when researching children with autism in a specialized institution, found that they do not play for lack of experience with toys and play and not for a biological factor. In this sense, she argues that it is indispensable to mediate the other in this process. According to the researcher, they need the mediation of the other for them to play; teaching them to play.

When researching children with autism in group activities, Martins (2009), in turn, analyzed the ways in which these children were oriented toward people and objects. She noted that the difficulty presented by these children in relation to the other was not directly related to failure in their interactions, but to the way the other addressed them in the face of a lack of reciprocity. Martins (2009) concluded that play is a social practice that extends to the child. For the author, playful activity is a possibility for the development of children with autism, from their social relationships: “... the subject-subject and the subject-object interactions are amplified in many moments, when the other, in this case, the researcher, attributes meaning to the toys, as well as to the people involved and the actions that make up the situation of play” (Martins, 2009, p. 80).

In this argumentative line, Chiote (2015) corroborates with Bagarollo and Martins, in defending the importance of the playful experience provided to the child through the participation of the adult in this process. The researcher points out the need to comply with the imaginative possibilities of the child with

autism by centralizing the role of the other in the signification of the world for him. In this way, he argues that the child learns to play with the other.

Advancing in the studies about playing, Ribas (2013) in a clinical investigation observed situations of symbolization of a child with autism. In the episode analyzed by her, the child transformed the concrete meaning of the object into another (symbolized). For example, she took a doll to poop pretending that the bin was the toilet, and then she made toilet flushing sound with her mouth. The researcher (2013) states that despite the peculiar characteristics – stereotyped and repetitive behavior, as well as difficulties in dealing with changes – the child under investigation presented significant symbolization skills.

Wolfberg (2009), in a longitudinal study with three children with autism, verified the emergence of role-playing. She created an integrated playgroup (IPG) program that includes playful situations with peers (children with and without autism). She reports that the use of realistic replicas at the moment of play and the mediation of the other (the work in pairs), for example, are indispensable elements for the configuration of the playful activity. In this way, Wolfberg (2009) demonstrates that children with autism presented advances, during the play activity with peer, in language, in the use of pivot object and in the role-playing (we will explore this aspect later).

In the light of these contemporary discussions about the playing of children with autism within the context of the historical-cultural perspective, this article aims to analyze the play of make-believe of children with autism, focusing on the symbolic resources that they use in the role-playing. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the academic debate, problematizing the role of play in the development of children with autism. We ask: how do children with autism play? In an unfolding, what are the symbolic resources that they use to signify playful actions in the role-playing?

## Method

In an attempt to answer these questions, we conducted the research in a public school of Early Childhood Education, of the Federal District (research approved by the Committee on Ethics of IH/UnB No. 51941615.2.000.5540). The research was developed in the first half of 2016 in a Special Classroom for students with autism. Six children with autism aged 4 to 6 years participated in the study. However, some children in the second grade, between 4 and 5 years old, appear in the data, as they divided the playground schedule with the students of the Special Classroom (participants in this research) and some moments of playing in the classroom. We adopted fictitious names for the participants, obeying the ethical requirements for researches with human beings. They are: a) Lui, 4 years old, diagnosed with Invasive Developmental Disorder (IDD)<sup>2</sup>, partially oralized; b) Gil, 4 years old, diagnosed with IDD, partially oralized; c) Dag, 4 years old, diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), non-oralized, presenting stereotypies; d) Tom, 5 years old, diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), non-oralized, presenting stereotypies, resistance to socialization; e) Fred, 5 years old, diagnosed with ASD, partially oralized; f) Edy, 6 years old, diagnosed with PDD, non-oralized.

### The construction and analysis of the data

The research with these children was developed during 4 months in weekly meetings. Each meeting lasted 5 hours a day, totaling 17 meetings. The playful situations were recorded on video and later transcribed and analyzed, totaling approximately sixty-three hours of video recordings. The investigation was developed in three different moments: a) approaching to the field with the intention of creating a link between the researcher and the children with autism with observation of the routine and playful activities with records in the field diary; b) video recordings of the situations of play, aiming to record on video the situations involving the make-believe of the children researched, which were

<sup>2</sup> The nomenclatures for defining the diagnosis of autism vary according to the reference year of the DSM adopted by the professional or according to the ICD. Thus, IDD is used by ICD-10; GDD adopted in DSM-IV and ASD in DSM-5.

carefully transcribed, with successive returns to the video recordings and; c) development of scenographic workshops, with the central objective of providing to the children differentiated situations of development of symbolic thinking, through a differentiated intervention with the creation of scenarios for the exploration of role-playing. After literal transcription of the data, situations involving the playing of the children researched with focus on gestures, body expressions and resources of expressions, were analyzed. Thus, to reach the objectives proposed in the research, we opted for the microgenetic analysis defined by Góes as “a form of data construction that requires the attention to details and the cutting/selection of interactive episodes ... resulting in a detailed description of the events” (2000a, p.9).

In this way, the data were processed and split into two main axes of analysis. For this article, we opted for the analysis of the axis that problematized the emergence of role-playing in make-believe play. This axis of analysis was subdivided into two sub-axes: 1) *The construction of the role-playing*; 2) *The assumption of roles by the child with autism: scenography and imagery resources, which will be presented below*.

## Results and analyses

In the total of the episodes chosen for analysis, we identified sophisticated processes of symbolic functioning of the child with autism at moments of make-believe.

In the first sub-axis, **1) The construction of the role-playing**, we observe that in many situations of make-believe, the assumption of roles is presumed, because the child does not verbalize which character he/she is embodying, as often happens with the typical child. It seems to us that the assumption of roles is given indirectly or implicitly and is characterized by the use of linguistic resources, by the corporal expressions and, specifically, by the participation of the other in the playful context, as we will see in **Episode 1: Angry beast**.

*The kids are in the school playground and Gil watches a small group of children talking. He decides to come closer and demonstrates to understand which play they are arranging. Suddenly, the children run after each other. Gil chases Beto (schoolmate from the green room). Soon after, Beto falls to the ground. When Beto is already on the ground, Gil stops, lowers his body slightly, towards the boy, approaches his friend with arms raised and hands with curved fingers, imitating claws; He wears an expression of fierce and makes a sound with his mouth:*

*— Hhhruuuuhurr! (growling like an angry beast).*

*Beto, still lying on the ground, looks at Gil, smiles, gets up and runs away.*

Gil approaches some schoolmates of the second grade, who seem to arrange some play, but we cannot understand what the boys talk to each other. He comes, approaches, observes, and understands what the children are proposing to each other. Gil seems to have no difficulties in joining the group, contradicting the traditional literature (Kanner, 2012). After all, Gil enters the game guided by the initial action of his schoolmates and, starting with the other, his play develops.

Rocha (2005) argues that: “In the process of establishment of the playful ability, therefore, the presence of the other is fundamental. The child is faced with people who provoke and propose the most different actions, among which are symbolic actions” (2005, p. 63). For the author, in the interaction process (child and the other), the other is a key element in the constitution of play. The adult, for example, not only names or emphasizes the object, but also gradually enables the child to act in the symbolic field. He attributes social and cultural significance to the child's actions; he gives sense to gestures, “gradually transforming them from action into language, from motor into semiotic” (Rocha, 2005, p.35).

In this argumentative logic, Elkonin (2009) argues that both the development of the actions with objects, that is, of the “... social ways of using them that have formed throughout history and have been aggregated to certain objects” (p.216), and the appearance of the premises of the children's play (children's play theory) / staged play (playing social role), both are linked to the interrelationships of children with adults. In addition, Elkonin (2009) affirms that the experimental formation of the children's play / staged play in both children with typical development and in children with disabilities “... show the presence of general rules of the development of the game related to the logical learning of the objectal

actions and with the emphasis on the adult as a model and agent of the human forms of activity and relationships. All this happens under the direction of adults and not spontaneously" (p. 270).

In the episode under analysis, Gil pretends to be a ferocious beast. However, pretending to be an animal is not only a common action and of little importance. On the contrary, Leontiev (2014) himself understood that this action implies the composition of a playful role. The author argues that the game of animals is a false exception to the playful role, because animals are featured as possessors of human functions and characteristics. In fact, "... in these stories and in these games only the concrete subject of the action is altered, as well as the very action and the relationships of which he participates, while the surrounding world remains profoundly human and realistic" (Leontiev, 2014, p. 133).

For a better understanding of this analysis, regarding the assumption of roles in the make-believe by the child with autism, it is fundamental to list some central points. In fact, the hegemonic literature characterizes the playing of the child with autism as something devoid of sense and meaning. It is interpreted more as repetitive and stereotyped movements than as play (Leboyer, 1995). In addition, some researchers say, the child during play is attached to the immediate impressions of the reality not going into the imaginative field (Kanner, 2012; Klinger & Souza, 2015; Passerino, 2005; Rivière, 2004; Williams & Wright, 2008). Another aspect that limits the make-believe, for some scholars, lies in the field of language. Most children with autism, according to these investigations, present a delay in oral language, which would delay the process of symbolic development, as we initially indicated. However, contrary to the tradition of studies on children with autism, we identified situations in which role-playing was present (Silva, 2017). Such situations were fortuitous, undoubtedly, and sometimes devoid of a very well-configured plot. Gil, for example, does not announce what role he will play while playing, but it is possible to presume it. In fact, the fierce beast staged by Gil is not based on verbal enunciation, but on gestures, movements, body expressions and resources of expressions used by the boy. Gil explores his character; has fun; plays with the other and gets rid of situational moorings Gil contradicts traditional literature.

It is important to point out that in the historical-cultural perspective the role of language is central. Symbolic appropriation qualitatively transforms the development of the psyche. This occurs with any child, regardless of his *developmental* peculiarity (Silva, 2017). In other episodes, for instance, we have identified that children play doctor or nurse by placing the stethoscope in their ears and pretending to listen to the heart of people and/or animals. They also pretend they are giving food to someone, as if they were the caregiver, or the mother, when feeding the doll, for instance. In these episodes, play usually involves the other and resources of expressions (not necessarily verbal language but symbolic resources). This is because the assumption of roles is linked to an alterity experience, that is, the experience of being in relationship with the other while playing.

Within this same perspective, Góes (2000a) affirms that in role-playing the child experiences the other's place (alterity). Thus, by assuming different social roles, or, as Vygotsky (2008) would say, various *fictitious-selves*, the child constructs (singularizing) his own self as he expands his understanding of himself and the surrounding world. For the author, "the imaginary play" is, therefore, an instance where the child handles, so to speak, images of himself and of other members of culture" (Góes, 2000a, p. 123). This discussion is interesting, since the alterity experience (the experience of otherness/experience of alterity) indirectly present in the exemplified episodes is seen as something impossible for the child with autism.

Valente (2010) comes to a conclusion on the idea of alterity in autism. For her, regardless of the theoretical line: "there is an absence of alterity in the phenomenon of autism ... In the field of psychiatric knowledge, this absence is expressed by the symptoms of isolation ... In psychoanalysis, this absence seems to be even more decisive, because it is precisely the absence of alterity that produces an autistic child..." (p. 147). Contrary to this defense, based on the data of this research, we can deduce that the child with autism does experience the role of the other. However, it is worth noting that such experimentation occurs in a qualitatively differentiated way, if compared to the child without the disorder.

In the sub-axis 2) *Assumption of roles by the child with autism: scenography and imagery resources*, we chose to try out a differentiated intervention strategy to understand role-playing. For that,

we created scenographic workshops, through the experimentation, creation of evocative scenarios on dramatic theme.

Inspired by the testimony of Grandin (a researcher with autism), as to her peculiar way of *thinking about images*, we reflected on the importance of visual production in the role-playing of children with autism (see Orrú, 2016). In fact, Grandin's reflections alerted us to one dimension: the importance of the visual production (building sceneries) at that moment of play. Thus, we decided to create scenographic contexts that were of interest to children, such as: pirates; superheroes among others. Let us see the *Episode 2: I, pirate*:

*The children are sitting in the middle of the room around the researcher for the beginning of the play. The students from the second grade are present. The children seem eager and curious, because there is a pirate boat in the classroom. The researcher says:*

*- Let's be surprised today!*

*Bento, a student from the second grade, responds pointing to the boat (which is in the back of the room, facing the wall):*

*- I know, I know, there's a boat there!*

*The researcher asks Teacher Julia for the bag with the accessories (but does not tell the children what it is). Gil is the only one standing, pacing back and forth in the midst of the children, seems to be looking for something. Edy is sitting next to the researcher. Tom is a little further away at the back, next to Dag. The researcher says:*

*- Gil, come here! Let's play!*

*The researcher takes Gil's hand and asks him to sit next to her. He bends down, showing that he is going to sit, but he stands up and pushes the researcher's hand, looking in the direction of the lockers and Teacher Julia, who is looking for the accessory bag.*

*The researcher begins a dialogue with the children about Peter Pan's play, which they watched in the theater the previous week. While talking to the children, the researcher turns to Gil and asks:*

*— Gil, did you go to see the play?" Tell Teacher Angélica how it was.*

*Gil is still standing looking in the direction of Professor Julia and ignores the researcher's speech. Gil has his hands clasped together, looking anxious. The other children are still sitting in front of the researcher waiting.*

*Teacher Julia hands the bag to the researcher and arouses the curiosity and euphoria in the children. Marcela, a student from the second grade, smiles, claps her hands and hugs Elisa (schoolmate from the second grade as well), showing joy. The researcher keeps them in suspense when she receives from teacher Julia the bag:*

*— oh*

*...*

*Gil sits quickly in front of the researcher. Fred, who was on the other side of the room, approaches and also sits on the floor next to her. The researcher continues:*

*— Right, let's sit here so we can play! Today we are going to play ... (the children respond together with the researcher):*

*— Pirate!*

*The children seem anxious. While waiting for the researcher to open the bag, Elisa bites her finger; Bento (also from the second grade) rubs his hands and cannot take his eyes off the bag, trying to see something. Marcela raises her hand and shouts from behind:*

*—... I want to be the sailor!*

*Bento then takes a position:*

*— I want to be Captain Hook!*

*John (also from the second grade) replies and says that he will be Captain Hook, and then the two students discuss who will be who in the play.*

*In the midst of the children's discussion, Gil tries to check the bag and says:*

— Hat! (referring to the pirate hat).

— Really! So who is going to be the pirate? —the researcher asks looking at everyone.

At the same time, Gil points to himself and replies:

— Irate!

The researcher then asks Gil:

— Are you going to be the pirate?

He nods his head in agreement. Looking and smiling at the researcher, he raises his hand and says:

— Yup! I ...irate!

Simultaneously, Gil puts both hands in the belly, showing that he will be the pirate. The researcher then confirms pointing to Gil:

— He's going to be the pirate!

Gil smiles. Dag, Fred, and Edy seem oblivious to what is going on. Dag touches Edy's hair and Fred moves away from the researcher, crawling on the floor.

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The researcher puts the pirate hat on Gil and repeats that he will be the pirate. Marcela claps her hands and celebrates:

— Cool, Gil will be the pirate!

While the researcher asks who wants the pirate's flag, Gil interrupts her and shouts closing one eye and pointing at it with his little finger:

— I want eye! I want eye!

Gil tries to take the pirate's eyepatch from the bag.

..]

The researcher hands out the accessories of the pirate among the children: the pirate's flag is with Manuela, who soon begins to swing it in the air. João gets the hook from Captain Hook; Bento gets Captain's helper bandana; Pedro receives the ax of the other pirate; Érica gets the eyepatch.

Gil grabs the telescope and then puts in front of his eye. He pretends that he is looking at something. Elisa tries to take the telescope from Gil's hands, because she is without any accessory, but he resists, he does not let loose of the telescope; the two start to fight, but Gil manages to keep the object.

The children seem excited about the accessories and talk all at the same time. The researcher encourages:

— But, for us to play, the pirate needs a ... boat!

The researcher gets up and the kids get up, too. They go toward the cardboard boat at the back of the room. Bento pretends that he is using the ax to cut something; Marcela jumps with the pirate flag in her hand. Gil looks at the room with the telescope and starts jumping with the children as well. João shouts that he is Captain Hook.

The researcher puts the pirate's boat in the middle of the room. The children are excited. They all want to get on the boat. Dag begins to pull the plastic strips that represent the water that is on the outside of the boat. The researcher asks everyone to sit down and explain how the boat moves. Tom literally follows the researcher's command and tries to sit on the boat.

...

The children take on their characters and begin to play. João (Captain Hook) and his helpers (Bento and Pedro) are positioned behind the boat, preparing to start sailing. Meanwhile, the other children act as spectators (audience) watching the staging, including Edy and Tom. Dag seems dispersed.

Gil gives continuity to the scene. He, with the telescope on his eye and standing, tries to locate the boat. The researcher instigates:

— Look, look for the boat, pirate! Have you found it?



*Gil nods his head in agreement. Then, he walks towards the boat to seize it. Fred, now, is who has the pirate's flag. The researcher says that he has to swing the flag to tell Gil where the boat is. Fred, smiling, swings the flag behind the boat.*

*Gil approaches the boat. João, Bento, and Pedro pretend to run away. Gil seizes the boat from Captain Hook and, with the help of the researcher, pretends to sail, pushing the boat in the opposite direction of Captain Hook and his helpers.*

*Now, Gil pushes the boat alone. Gil loses his balance, falls over the boat and it breaks. The researcher shouts from afar:*

*— The ship has shipwrecked! It has happened, people!*

*All the kids start laughing. .*

In the episode described, the children are all sitting, in the middle of the room, around the researcher for the beginning of the play. They are restless, they seem anxious. After all, there is something different in the room: a pirate ship. Gil seemed to foretell what would happen. The apparently impatient behavior of the little boy one became more latent when the researcher asked Teacher Julia for a bag of the pirate's accessories. The researcher did not reveal to the children the contents of the bag, arousing some curiosity between them, including in Gil<sup>3</sup>. The literature discusses the lack of interest in toys and play by the child with autism; difficulty in anticipating the future and inferring others' intentions (Frith, 2015; Williams & Wright, 2008). However, this initial part of the episode presents us with contrary situations. It is remarkable the interest of Gil and the other children by the bag of the researcher, or rather, the contents of the bag.

Following, the researcher, in front of the state of anxiety and euphoria presented by the children, among them Gil himself, invites students to play pirate. At this point, all children speak at the same time; some scream that they want to be the sailor, others the Captain Hook. Gil then announces which character he wants to play: to play at being 'Pirate'. Contrary to what was observed above, the hegemonic literature has pointed to the inability of the child with autism to assume roles, as explained in the previous sub-axis. However, we agree with Wolfberg (2009) that this cannot be generalized and that the contexts of development of the playful situation in children with autism need to be observed under another theoretical prism. After all, they play about assuming roles.

In our study, we observed that children with autism really need qualified mediation to enter the role-playing. But not only that! The scenography, the visual production seems to be an important element in the composition of the playful event. Wolfberg (2009) found that it was through social mediation that the children she investigated developed their playful actions and learned to play. Besides the participation of the other, Wolfberg (2009) defends the use of scenarios with realistic replicas such as: toy stove, playhouse, toy shopping cart, play food, etc. In her words, "the realism and structure of toys, and the scenarios will influence how the child will use them, and this then needs to be taken into account" (Wolfberg, 2003, p. 75, our translation).

Given the above and based on the field research, we created the scenographic workshops, aiming at the expansion of role-playing by the child with autism. Thus, in the episode described, Gil had contact with distinct scenographic elements: pirate boat, pirate hat, eyepatch, bandana, axe, pirate flag. These scenic elements (imagery scenery, costumes, accessories, etc.) arranged in the playful context presented themselves as promoters of role-playing take on by Gil. In fact, from such scenic elements, more specifically the costumes and accessories, Gil composes his character.

Elkonin (2009), based on the studies of his collaborators, described the development path of the role-playing. According to the author's analysis, the path goes from,

<sup>3</sup> In the week of the Peter Pan's play, the researcher suggested to the teachers that at one point in the lesson they explore with the children the pirate's accessories - hat, eye patch, bezel, flag, bandana, which would be worn by her at the next meeting.

the concrete action with objects to the synthesized playful action and, from this, to the staged playful action: there is *spoon, to feed* with the spoon; to feed *the doll* with the spoon; to feed the doll *like mom*; this is, in a schematic way, the path to the staged play (p. 258-259, author's italics).

For Silva (2006, 2012), in playing: "... the organization of scenarios, the assumption of roles and the construction of the playful scene (*the logic of the situation on the imaginary plane*) are aspects that bring traits of reality to what is staged" (2012, p. 28, author's italics). But it is not only that, after all, the body movements, the gestures, the very word, which are present in the composition of the playful choreography give indications to the other (person outside the scene) of how the child also perceives his immediate reality.

As discussed in sub-axis 1, in the role-playing, the child puts himself in the place of the other (Chiote, 2015; Cruz, 2015, Góes, 2000a, 2000b; Oliveira & Stoltz, 2010). In other words, on the imaginary plane, by invoking what Vygotsky (2007) calls the *fictitious self*, the child recreates the other and himself in a dialectical movement. Góes (2000a) argues that in this (re) creation of roles, the child transits between two sceneries: the projected one and the represented one. In the represented scenery, the child is based on the object itself or on the partners of play, constituents of the playful scene. As to the conjectural scenery the child relates with presumed characters and situations, which are not directly given in the playful context. In the episode described, Gil acts in a represented scenery, where objects and players (partners) are present concretely in the *setting*.

Continuing with the discussion, we observe the articulation of the scenario and the mediation of the researcher as fundamental stages for the development of the playful event. Children gradually are composing their characters according to the scenic elements (scenery, costumes, accessories) arranged within the playful context where the plot develops.

## Considerations

The present study focused on configuration of the role-playing in the composition of make-believe of the child with autism, with reference to researches in the field of historical-cultural perspective. Two aspects were highlighted: the participation of the other and the scenographic creation. We argue that both are responsible for the emergence of more sophisticated symbolization processes in playing, of these children, when it involves role-playing. In fact, the adult-child and child-child interpersonal dynamics articulated with the creation of scenarios and costumes gave the children researched a displacement of the situations imposed by reality, expanding the exploration of the imaginative universe. The created scenarios enabled the exploration and embodiment of roles, allowing them to act beyond the expected behavior.

In summary, we argue that both the (intentional) participation of the role of the other in the play (with special attention to the role of the adult) and the construction of scenarios are mediating elements that promote the development of the child with autism, broadening processes of symbolization and alteritary experiences involved in make-believe. The data discussed in this study point in a direction that contradicts part of the more traditional literature on the subject, instigating the consolidation of new investigative paths which can *tension* the very terminology and diagnosis that characterizes autistic spectrum disorder.

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