


PLAY AS LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

 <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.032-002>

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Abstract

This chapter discusses play as a constitutive language and experience in Early Childhood Education, articulating pedagogical practices, active methodologies, project-based learning and the organization of time, space and materials. Grounded in theoretical contributions from childhood studies and experiential pedagogy, the text understands the child as an active subject, a producer of culture and a participant in intentionally mediated educational processes. The theoretical analysis highlights that play should not be understood as a secondary or recreational activity, but as a structuring axis of learning and child development, in line with the guidelines of the Brazilian National Common Core Curriculum. Active methodologies are addressed as pedagogical stances that value experience, investigation and attentive listening to children, avoiding premature schooling processes. Project-based learning is presented as a powerful strategy for integrating multiple languages and promoting meaningful experiences, while respecting the rhythms of childhood. Finally, the organization of time, space and materials is discussed as a central pedagogical dimension capable of enhancing play as language and experience. It is concluded that pedagogical practices grounded in play contribute to a more meaningful, holistic and child-centered Early Childhood Education.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Play, Pedagogical practices, Active methodologies, Project-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education constitutes the first stage of basic education and plays a fundamental role in the holistic development of children, encompassing cognitive, affective, social, bodily, and linguistic dimensions. At this stage, play assumes centrality as a privileged form of expression, communication, and meaning-making. For Kramer (2007), recognizing play as language means understanding the child as a historical and cultural subject, capable of producing meanings and actively participating in educational experiences.

In recent decades, studies on childhood and education have indicated the need to overcome pedagogical practices based on the anticipation of school contents or on the fragmentation of activities. Kishimoto (2011) highlights that proposals focused exclusively on outcomes or products tend to empty play of its meaning, reducing it to a didactic resource. In contrast, approaches that value experience, listening to the child, and pedagogical intentionality strengthen practices consistent with the specificity of childhood.

This understanding finds support in the National Common Curricular Base, which establishes interactions and play as structuring axes of Early Childhood Education and organizes the curriculum around fields of experience (BRASIL, 2018). By adopting this perspective, the BNCC recognizes that learning occurs in relationships, explorations, and meaningful experiences, respecting the unique tempos and modes of young children.

Within the scope of contemporary pedagogical practices, active methodologies gain relevance by fostering learning processes centered on participation, investigation, and experimentation. Dewey (1959) had already affirmed that learning entails living meaningful experiences, in which the subject acts upon the world and reflects on their actions. Moran (2018) revisits this conception by advocating pedagogical practices that place the student at the center of the educational process, including in Early Childhood Education, provided that the characteristics of child development are respected.

When designed for young children, project-based learning emerges as a powerful strategy to articulate play, children's curiosity, and the construction of knowledge in meaningful contexts. Hernández (1998) understands projects as forms of curricular organization that begin with questions relevant to the subjects involved. In Early Childhood Education, this approach makes it possible to integrate different languages, promote collaboration, and establish relationships between school and the lived world, as Barbosa (2009) also points out.

Furthermore, the organization of time, spaces, and materials plays a central role in the constitution of pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education. Malaguzzi (1999) conceives space as the "third

teacher,” capable of provoking interactions, inquiries, and learning. From this perspective, intentionally planned environments enhance play as experience and language, transforming the school space into an active pedagogical element (HORN, 2014).

In light of these considerations, this chapter aims to analyze play as a constitutive language and experience of Early Childhood Education, understanding it as the structuring axis of pedagogical practices and the curriculum at this stage of basic education. We start from the conception that play, by articulating symbolic, bodily, social, and cognitive dimensions, is configured as a privileged form of learning and development in childhood, as indicated by Vygotsky (2007) and Kishimoto (2011). From this perspective, we discuss pedagogical practices grounded in active methodologies, project-based learning, and the intentional organization of time, spaces, and materials, understood as pedagogical dimensions inseparable from play. It is thus assumed that teacher mediation is a central element for play to become a meaningful formative experience, in line with contemporary curricular guidelines and with the principles established by the National Common Curricular Base (BRASIL, 2018).

With the aim of synthesizing the main theoretical axes discussed in this chapter and making explicit the articulation among play, pedagogical practices, and the organization of everyday life in Early Childhood Education, a conceptual framework is presented below. Table 1 systematizes the pedagogical dimensions addressed, highlighting their contributions to Early Childhood Education and the theoretical references that underpin them. This synthesis seeks to offer the reader an integrated view of the assumptions that guide the analysis developed in the subsequent sections, reinforcing play as the structuring axis of educational experiences in childhood.

Table 1 – Play as a structuring axis of pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education

Pedagogical dimension	Contribution to Early Childhood Education	Theoretical basis
Play as a language	Form of expression, communication and construction of meaning by the child	Vygotsky (2007); Benjamin (2012); Kishimoto (2011)
Active methodologies	Valuing experience, investigation and protagonism children	Dewey (1959); Moran (2018); Freire (1996)
Project-based learning	Language integration and knowledge building significant	Hernández (1998); Barbosa (2009); Zabala (1998)
Time management	Respect for the rhythms of childhood and continuation of experiences	Horn (2014); Barbosa (2009)
Organization of spaces and materials	Space as a pedagogical element that provokes interactions and learnings	Malaguzzi (1999); Montessori (1965)
Teacher mediation	Planning, listening and pedagogical intent	Tardif (2002); Freire (1996)

Source: Prepared by the authors (2026)

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Play occupies a central place in Early Childhood Education because it constitutes a privileged form of expression, communication, and symbolic elaboration by the child. Kishimoto (2011) states that, in playing, the child interprets the world, constructs meanings, and establishes relationships with others and with culture. Thus, understanding play as language implies recognizing that the child expresses, communicates, and learns through playful, bodily, and symbolic actions.

From a historical-cultural perspective, Vygotsky (2007) understands play as a fundamental activity for the development of higher psychological functions. By assuming roles and rules in play, the child operates with meanings that go beyond the immediate situation, creating zones of proximal development. In these spaces, learning occurs mediated by social interaction, language, and imagination.

The notion of play as experience is deepened in Benjamin’s reflections (2012), for whom childhood is constructed in a sensitive relationship with the world and cultural objects. According to the

author, play allows the child to elaborate experiences through repetition, invention, and narrative. Play, in this sense, is not reduced to action itself, but involves memory, imagination, and meaning-making.

By treating play as cultural language, Huizinga (2014) contributes by affirming that the game is a constitutive element of human culture. In *Homo ludens*, the author emphasizes that play precedes and permeates different forms of social organization, being an expression of freedom, creation, and meaning. In Early Childhood Education, this understanding broadens the pedagogical value of play, recognizing it as cultural practice rather than a mere preparation for future learning.

This approach is deepened in pedagogical proposals that value the multiple languages of childhood. Malaguzzi (1999) maintains that the child expresses themselves through “a hundred languages,” among which play occupies a central position. Through play, the child investigates the world, constructs hypotheses, and communicates their thoughts, shifting the focus from a pedagogy of instruction to a pedagogy of listening and experience.

In the Brazilian context, Kishimoto (2011) emphasizes that play, when intentionally mediated by the teacher, constitutes the structuring axis of pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education. The author stresses that pedagogical intentionality does not eliminate the playful character of play, but rather enhances it as a meaningful learning experience.

This conception is supported by the guidelines of the National Common Curricular Base, which recognizes interactions and play as structuring axes of Early Childhood Education and organizes the curriculum around fields of experience (BRASIL, 2018). By valuing play as language and experience, the BNCC reaffirms the child as a subject of rights, active in the construction of knowledge and a participant in intentionally organized educational practices.

In this direction, understanding play as language and experience supports pedagogical practices consistent with the specificity of childhood. By recognizing play as the structuring axis of the curriculum, Early Childhood Education reaffirms its commitment to a meaningful, dialogical, and holistic formation, in which learning is living experiences in the body, in language, and in social relations.

ACTIVE METHODOLOGIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

When discussed within the scope of Early Childhood Education, active methodologies require careful conceptual understanding in order to avoid reductionist interpretations that associate them with anticipating school contents or with the uncritical adoption of didactic procedures characteristic of other stages of basic education. In childhood, the notion of an active methodology should be understood as the intentional organization of experiences in which children participate as protagonists, exploring, investigating, playing, and assigning meaning to lived situations (DEWEY, 1959).

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Dewey (1959) had already advocated that learning occurs through experience, understood as continuous interaction between subject and environment. For the author, learning does not mean receiving ready-made information, but engaging in problematizing situations that demand action, reflection, and the reconstruction of meanings. In Early Childhood Education, this conception materializes in pedagogical proposals that value play, curiosity, and investigation as legitimate forms of learning.

From this perspective, active methodologies are not configured as a set of isolated techniques or strategies, but as a pedagogical stance that recognizes the child as an active subject in the educational process. Moran (2018) emphasizes that active practices presuppose teacher intentionality, sensitive listening, and constant mediation, so that the experiences lived by children are transformed into opportunities for meaningful learning. Thus, the centrality of the child in active methodologies does not eliminate the teacher's role; on the contrary, it requires an even more qualified teaching performance.

When discussing Early Childhood Education, it is essential to highlight that the activity of the young child is essentially playful, bodily, and relational. In this sense, active methodologies are realized through play situations, exploration of materials, investigation of the environment, and interaction with peers. Vygotsky (2007) contributes by affirming that development occurs in social interactions mediated by language and culture, which reinforces the importance of pedagogical proposals that favor joint action, dialogue, and cooperation among children.

The National Common Curricular Base also aligns with this understanding by recognizing interactions and play as structuring axes of Early Childhood Education. By organizing the curriculum around fields of experience, the BNCC proposes pedagogical practices that respect the ways in which children learn, valuing experimentation, curiosity, and the construction of meanings from everyday experiences (BRASIL, 2018). In this context, active methodologies are expressed as practices that enhance these axes, rather than as external models imposed on the curriculum of childhood.

It is important to stress that, in Early Childhood Education, active methodologies should not be confused with overly directed activities or with the imposition of predefined results. Kishimoto (2011) warns that excessively structured pedagogical proposals can compromise the playful character of experiences, emptying play of its meaning. Thus, pedagogical intentionality must coexist with flexibility, respect for children's interests, and openness to the unexpected.

In this sense, listening to the child assumes a central role in active pedagogical practices. Freire (1996) emphasizes that teaching implies dialogue, openness to the other, and recognition of the subject as a producer of knowledge. In Early Childhood Education, this listening materializes in attentive observation of children's actions, speech, and play, allowing the teacher to reorganize time, spaces, and proposals based on the experiences lived in the group.

Therefore, active methodologies in Early Childhood Education are configured as pedagogical practices that value children's protagonism without disregarding teacher mediation. By articulating play, experience, and pedagogical intentionality, these methodologies contribute to the construction of meaningful learning, respecting the tempos of childhood and promoting the holistic development of children.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

When situated in the context of Early Childhood Education, project-based learning should be understood as a form of pedagogical organization that values curiosity, investigation, and the active

involvement of children in meaningful experiences. Unlike traditional school models, projects in childhood are not guided by the linearity of contents or by previously defined products, but arise from interests, questions, and situations experienced by the children themselves (HERNÁNDEZ, 1998).

Since its origins, the proposal of working with projects has been associated with the idea of meaningful and integrated learning. Kilpatrick (1935), when discussing the project method, had already argued that learning implies engaging in activities that are meaningful to the subject, in which action and reflection are articulated. In Early Childhood Education, this conception takes on specific contours, as projects are built from play, exploration of the environment, and social interactions, respecting the ways young children learn.

Hernández (1998) reinforces that projects make it possible to break with curricular fragmentation, fostering the integration of different languages and areas of knowledge. In the context of Early Childhood Education, this integration manifests naturally, since children's experiences simultaneously involve bodily, affective, cognitive, and symbolic aspects. Thus, pedagogical projects enable the articulation of drawing, movement, orality, symbolic play, and exploration of materials around themes that are meaningful to the group.

This perspective is consonant with the studies of Barbosa (2009), who highlights that projects in Early Childhood Education should be understood as open, processual, and collective experiences. For the author, the pedagogical value of the project does not lie in the final product, but in the learning pathways experienced by the children, in the hypotheses formulated, in the mistakes made, and in the negotiations carried out collectively. Such an understanding shifts the focus of assessment to processes, fostering deeper and more contextualized learning.

Project-based learning also dialogues with the perspective of competencies, understood as the integrated mobilization of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the face of complex situations. Zabala (1998) states that pedagogical practices oriented by projects favor the construction of knowledge articulated with action, reflection, and decision-making. In Early Childhood Education, this mobilization

is expressed in situations in which children observe, question, experiment, and construct provisional explanations about the world.

The National Common Curricular Base reinforces this approach by organizing the Early Childhood Education curriculum around fields of experience, encouraging pedagogical proposals that value investigation, curiosity, and children's protagonism (BRASIL, 2018). In this sense, project-based learning proves consistent with contemporary curricular guidelines, provided it respects the tempos of childhood and is intentionally mediated by the teacher.

Thus, working with projects in Early Childhood Education means creating conditions for children to experience integrated, meaningful, and contextualized learning experiences. When articulated with play and interactions, project-based learning helps to strengthen children's protagonism, promote authorship, and expand possibilities for meaning-making in daily school life.

ORGANIZATION OF TIME, SPACES, AND MATERIALS AS A PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION

The organization of time, spaces, and materials constitutes a central dimension of pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education, exerting direct influence on the learning experiences lived by children. Far from being a merely administrative or logistical aspect, this organization expresses conceptions of childhood, learning, and education that guide everyday school life (BARBOSA, 2009).

Malaguzzi (1999) contributes decisively by asserting that space can be understood as the "third teacher," alongside the teacher and the children. From this perspective, educational environments should be conceived as provocative spaces that invite exploration, interaction, and investigation. In Early Childhood Education, the arrangement of materials, the organization of learning corners, and the flexibility of spaces enhance play as language and formative experience.

The temporal dimension also plays a relevant role in the daily life of Early Childhood Education. Horn (2014) highlights that the tempos of childhood are not organized according to the logic of productivity or the fragmentation of activities, but demand continuity, repetition, and the possibility of

deepening experiences. Respecting the child's time implies allowing play to be prolonged, projects to develop over days or weeks, and learning to occur without haste or constant interruptions.

In this context, the organization of materials takes on a fundamental pedagogical character. Montessori (1965) had already emphasized the importance of prepared environments, in which materials are accessible, diverse, and appropriate to children's possibilities. In contemporary Early Childhood Education, this conception is broadened to include unstructured materials, everyday objects, and natural resources, which favor imagination, creation, and symbolic play.

The articulation among time, spaces, and materials contributes to the construction of more democratic and inclusive learning environments. Barbosa (2009) emphasizes that flexible environments allow children to choose, negotiate, and reorganize their experiences, strengthening autonomy and childhood protagonism. Thus, space ceases to be a passive backdrop and becomes an active part of the educational process.

The National Common Curricular Base also recognizes the importance of this organization by highlighting that children's experiences are constructed in interactions, in play, and in the contexts offered by the educational environment (BRASIL, 2018). Therefore, the organization of time, spaces, and materials must be aligned with the fields of experience, ensuring coherence among curriculum, pedagogical practice, and children's lived experiences.

Therefore, understanding the organization of time, spaces, and materials as a pedagogical dimension implies recognizing that learning in Early Childhood Education is constructed in everyday life, in relationships, and in lived experiences. Environments planned in an intentional, flexible manner, sensitive to children's needs, enhance play as language, strengthen meaningful pedagogical practices, and contribute to an education that respects childhood in its entirety.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this chapter, we have sought to understand play as a constitutive language and experience of Early Childhood Education, articulating pedagogical practices, active methodologies, project-based learning, and the organization of time, spaces, and materials. We started from the assumption that childhood has its own ways of learning and expressing itself, which cannot be reduced to schooling practices or to the anticipation of formal contents, as Kramer (2007) and Kishimoto (2011) warn. In this sense, play was assumed as the structuring axis of educational experiences, in line with contemporary curricular guidelines.

The theoretical analysis developed showed that play, understood as symbolic, cultural, and relational language, constitutes a privileged space for learning and development. Vygotsky (2007) demonstrates that, in playing, the child creates zones of proximal development, expanding their cognitive and social possibilities through interaction. This understanding is deepened by Benjamin (2012), who highlights play as a sensitive and narrative experience through which the child elaborates the world and assigns meaning to everyday experiences. Thus, play is not restricted to playful action, but involves complex processes of signification and cultural construction.

Regarding pedagogical practices, we discussed that active methodologies, when situated in Early Childhood Education, should be understood as pedagogical stances that value children's experience, investigation, and participation, rather than as closed techniques or models. Dewey (1959) had already pointed out that learning entails living meaningful experiences, and Moran (2018) reinforces that the centrality of the student in educational practices demands teacher intentionality and qualified mediation. In Early Childhood Education, such principles materialize in proposals that articulate play, sensitive listening, and the pedagogical organization of everyday life.

Project-based learning proved to be especially pertinent for young children, insofar as it favors the integration of different languages, curiosity, and children's protagonism. Hernández (1998) and Barbosa (2009) highlight that projects make it possible to overcome curricular fragmentation, valuing learning

processes over final products. When articulated with play and interactions, pedagogical projects become powerful experiences of meaning-making, respecting the tempos of childhood and promoting contextualized learning.

Another central aspect discussed in this chapter concerns the organization of time, spaces, and materials as a pedagogical dimension. Malaguzzi (1999) conceives space as the “third teacher,” capable of provoking interactions, inquiries, and learning. Horn (2014) and Montessori (1965) reinforce that environments planned in an intentional, flexible, and accessible way enhance autonomy, exploration, and symbolic play. Thus, the organization of everyday life in Early Childhood Education expresses conceptions of child, learning, and education, directly influencing the quality of experiences lived.

The reflections presented throughout the chapter directly dialogue with the National Common Curricular Base, which recognizes interactions and play as structuring axes of Early Childhood Education and organizes the curriculum around fields of experience (BRASIL, 2018). By valuing play as language and experience, the child is reaffirmed as a subject of rights, active in the construction of knowledge and a participant in intentionally organized educational practices.

It is concluded, therefore, that understanding play as language and experience in Early Childhood Education implies rethinking pedagogical practices, curricula, and forms of organizing everyday school life. Active methodologies, project-based learning, and intentionally planned educational environments are configured as powerful pathways toward an education that respects childhood in its entirety. By recognizing play as the structuring axis of the educational process, Early Childhood Education reaffirms its commitment to a holistic, dialogical, and meaningful formation, in which learning is living experiences in the body, in language, and in social relationships.

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