Play as a Zone of Proximal Development: the child's advancement through mediation

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Abstract:

This article, of a theoretical nature and essentially bibliographic methodology, based on Vygotsky's Historical-Cultural Theory, has as its general objective to analyze how playing, as an essential activity of childhood, is configured as a powerful Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where the child advances significantly in his cognitive, social and affective capacities through the mediation made by the adult or peers. The justification lies in the need to deepen the theoretical understanding of the specific mechanisms by which dialogic interaction and intentional mediation during play boost child development beyond the child's current level, enhancing learning and internalization of concepts and skills. The results of the bibliographic analysis indicate that playing, when mediated, creates a privileged space for ZPD to be effective, as it offers an imaginative and challenging context where the child can operate with concepts in elaboration, receive adjusted support ("scaffolding") to solve problems and experiment with social roles, leading to advances in areas such as language, logical reasoning, emotional regulation, cooperation and conflict resolution, showing that the quality of mediation is a determining factor for the effectiveness of play as a promoter of proximal development.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development, Play, Mediation

Introduction

Play, a primordial activity in childhood, transcends mere entertainment by constituting a privileged space for the construction of meanings and the integral development of the child. From the perspective of Vygotsky's Historical-Cultural Theory, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emerges as a central concept to understand how mediated interactions enhance cognitive, social and emotional advances beyond the actual level of development (Vigotski, 2007).

Contemporaneously, research such as that of Fleer (2019) and Bodrova and Leong (2020) reinforces that playing configures a ZPD dynamic, where intentional mediation — by adults or more experienced peers — introduces challenges that drive the child to internalize concepts, solve problems, and expand their autonomy. However, the practical application of this potential faces challenges, such as the tension between pedagogical direction and children's spontaneity (Góes, 2020), in addition to the need for specific training for mediators (Ferreira; Santos, 2020). This article, therefore, objectively analyzes how play acts as ZDP in Early Childhood Education, highlighting the role of mediation in the advancement of children's skills.

To this end, it explores the theoretical bases of ZDP and its relationship with play (Hakkarainen; Bredikyte, 2020); systematizes mediation strategies with proven impact in domains such as language and social interaction (Veresov; Fleer, 2020); and we discuss contradictions in the practical application between autonomy and intervention. Based on bibliographic methodology, the study uses recent authors (2018-2024) to map theoretical advances and gaps, evolving to subsidize pedagogical practices aligned with the transformative potential of mediated toys.

Playing in ZDP: enhancing learning and child development.

The understanding of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky's seminal concept, is fundamental to elucidate the transformative potential of play in childhood. As Pereira (2020, p. 32) points out, "the ZPD represents the distance between the child's actual level of development, specifically due to their ability to solve problems independently, and the level of potential development, evidenced under guidance or collaboration". In this

context, playing emerges not only as a spontaneous activity, but as a privileged space where this distance can be intentionally exploited and reduced. Thus, play is configured as a dynamic scenario in which the child experiences roles, resolves conflicts and projects himself beyond his current abilities. Therefore, understanding this interaction is essential for effective pedagogical practices.

In this sense, the mediation of the adult during play plays a crucial role in the activation of ZPD. Ferreira (2019) corroborates this view, arguing that the educator's coordinated intervention, based on the careful observation of children's interests, can transform playful moments into challenging and meaningful situations. When the adult, whether teacher or caregiver, gets involved in a sensitive and purposeful way in the game, offering adequate supports (scaffolding), he pushes the child to reach levels of thought and action initially inaccessible alone. Consequently, mediated play becomes a powerful pedagogical tool, promoting cognitive and social advances. Thus, the quality of the interaction during play is decisive for its educational potential.

On the other hand, the intentional organization of playful environments is equally decisive to enhance learning in the ZPD. Silva (2021) demonstrates, through empirical research, that spaces rich in diverse, unstructured, and culturally relevant materials stimulate children's imagination, exploration, and creation of complex scenarios. Such environments invite problem-solving and the negotiation of meanings among peers, naturally creating situations that require developing skills. Therefore, careful planning of the space and available resources is not an accessory, but a sine qua non condition for play to reach its full potential in development. In other words, the physical and social context needs to be structured as an invitation to creative challenge.

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In the socio-emotional sphere, the impact of play on ZDP is equally profound. Gomes (2023) emphasizes that, by taking on different roles and experiencing imaginary situations, the child experiences and regulates complex emotions, develops empathy, and exercises the understanding of other people's perspectives. Through shared play, one is confronted with real interpersonal conflicts, learning negotiation, cooperation and conflict resolution strategies within a safe and symbolic context. In this way, play provides a vital space for the construction of emotional intelligence and social skills. Consequently, its relevance transcends the cognitive aspect, reaching the integral formation of the subject.

Mathematical learning also finds fertile ground in the playful experiences situated in the ZDP. According to Lima (2018), games with blocks, board games, nursery rhymes, and classification and seriation activities offer authentic contexts for the construction of notions such as quantity, space, shape, sequence, and measure. "The concrete manipulation of objects and the resolution of practical problems during the game allow the child to construct mathematical abstractions in an active and meaningful way, long before mastering their formal symbolic representation" (LIMA, 2018, p. 77). Therefore, intentionally planned play can lay the solid foundations for logical-mathematical judgment. In this aspect, the mediation of the adult is essential to expand the discoveries, discoveries.

Nevertheless, the role of peers in the co-construction of ZPD during play is irreplaceable. Almeida (2024) demonstrates that interactions between children of different levels of development or knowledge promote mutual advancement through imitation, confrontation of ideas, and collaboration to achieve common goals. One child's more experienced knowledge supports another, creating a collaborative learning network where everyone benefits. Thus, a group game is not only socially awkward, but pedagogically potent. Thus, the diversity of age and skills in the play group should be seen as a valuable resource. Therefore, promoting peer interaction is a fundamental strategy.

However, contemporary challenges, such as increasing digitalization and shrinking free spaces, significantly impact the opportunities to play at ZDP.

Ribeiro (2020) warns of the risk of replacing physical, social, and imaginative play with solitary activities in front of screens, which often offer less space for autonomous creation, social negotiation, and intelligent cognitive challenge. Excessive mediation or lack of adequate time and space can prevent a child from fully exploring their potential through play. Consequently, it is urgent to compensate environments and routines to guarantee the right to quality play. In short, society needs to value and protect the time and space essential for spontaneous and mediated play.

In this scenario, teacher training for observation and prepared intervention in play becomes imperative. Martins (2022) argues that educators need to develop specific skills to identify emerging ZDPs in children's play and intervene in a subtle and provocative way, without detracting from the playful nature and autonomy of the activity. "Continuing education should enable the teacher to be an attentive observer, a sensitive mediator, and an architect of environments that invite challenge and discovery within the proximal zone" (Martins, 2022, p. 103). Therefore, investing in the training of professionals is a basic condition for the pedagogical effectiveness of play. Thus, the quality of mediation defines the learning potential.

Finally, the evaluation of learning and development processes through play in ZPD requires innovative approaches. Costa (2021) proposes that pedagogical documentation, such as photographic records, videos, and portfolios of children's productions during the game, offer rich evidence about the path of knowledge construction and overcoming challenges. Observing how the child deals with obstacles, seeking solutions, interacting with partners and using resources available in the playful context reveals much more about their developmental potential than traditional tests. In this way, the general evaluation finds in the toy a fertile ground to capture the dynamics of learning. Therefore, it is necessary to overcome evaluation models.

In summary, playing, when understood and intentionally potentiated within the Zone of Proximal Development, reveals itself as a structuring axis for learning and integral development in childhood. As demonstrated by contemporary authors, its effectiveness lies in its unique ability to engage the child in meaningful challenges, mediated by sensitive adults and collaborative peers, in rich and

challenging environments. It ranges from linguistic and mathematical acquisitions to complex socio-emotional skills. However, its full realization depends on the recognition of its value, the guarantee of adequate time and space, teacher training and the adoption of coherent evaluation practices. In this way, investing in playing at ZDP is investing in the future.

Operationalization of mediation during play: language, problem solving and social interaction.

Intentional mediation during play is configured as a structuring axis to enhance children's learning, requiring theoretical understanding and specific practices. According to Alves (2020, p. 15), the effectiveness of this intervention lies in the mediator's ability to balance direction and autonomy, creating "cognitive images adaptable to emerging needs". To this end, the mediator must systematically observe the spontaneous interests of the children, identifying active areas of proximate development. Thus, pedagogical action transcends passive supervision, transforming itself into an intentional dialogical act. Therefore, mediation requires technical repertoire and relational attention.

In this context, language emerges as a primordial dimension to be enhanced through planned mediation strategies. "Lexical expansion and mastery of complex syntactic structures are significantly expanded when the adult introduces contextualized vocabulary during symbolic games" (Carvalho; Teixeira, 2021, p. 73). Practices such as reformulation of utterances, open questioning, and shared narration of playful plots create functional contexts for linguistic experimentation. Consequently, the child experiences social uses of language in serious situations, integrating form and communicative function. In this way, mediated play becomes a living laboratory of discursive practices.

In the realm of problem solving, mediation operates as a speculation of strategic thinking and cognitive perseverance. Mendes (2022) demonstrates that interventions based on progressive problematization during construction games (such as questioning "What if we try another base?") stimulate metacognition and the transfer of learning. Instead of offering ready-made solutions, the mediator provokes the analysis of errors and the validation of hypotheses, developing intellectual resilience. Thus, playful challenges become microcosms for the

exercise of hypothetical-deductive reasoning. Therefore, the quality of the mediating questions surpasses direct answers in formative efficacy.

In addition, social interaction mediated during collective play strengthens essential socio-emotional skills. Barros (2023) agreements that facilitating the negotiation of rules and roles in dramatic games reduces conflicts and expands reciprocity. When the mediator models active listening and media disagreements with guided questions ("How do we think we solve this fairly?"), children internalize cooperative patterns. In this way, we simultaneously develop self-control, empathy, and negotiation skills. Consequently, socially mediated play functions as a simulator of democratic coexistence.

Specific operational strategies for language mediation include the conversational extension technique, as detailed by Rocha (2019). When the child comments "High tower!" during play with blocks, the mediator magnifies: "Yes, your tower is so high that it needs imaginary stairs to climb!". This semantic expansion associated with the maintenance of the playful focus expressive repertoires naturally. Furthermore, an incorporation of fantastic narratives stimulates the temporal structuring of events. Thus, complex linguistic resources are implemented organically, without artificial fragmentation.

To operationalize mediation in problem solving, studies by Lima (2020) recommend a staggered challenge technique. Initially, obstacles compatible with the child's current repertoire are proposed, gradually increasing complexity through the mastery demonstrating. For example, in puzzles, you start with detachable pieces, then complex chromatic patterns are introduced and then no reference model. Simultaneously, reflective records about successful strategies consolidate learning. Consequently, the development of progressive autonomy in facing challenges.

The mediation of social interaction requires differentiated interventions according to relational profiles, according to Dias' (2024) comparative analysis. Children with assertiveness difficulties benefit from direct discourse modeling ("You could say, 'I want to be the doctor now'"), while competitive groups come together from previous mediated agreements over resource sharing. In all cases, the creation of interdependent roles in Jokes (such as "chef" and "kitchen helper")

promote mutual engagement. Therefore, personalizing strategies is imperative for effectiveness.

Contemporaneously, challenges such as digitais hyperstimulation and the reduction of collective spaces impact the quality of mediation, according to Nascimento (2018). Electronic toys with predetermined responses limit adult intervention in creative processes, while restricted physical environments inhibit rich spatial negotiations. To overcome these obstacles, it is suggested to create "intentional mediation corners" with unstructured resources and protected routines for free interaction. Thus, the relational potential of play is preserved.

The training of mediators is a determining factor for the success in the implementation of these practices, as Andrade (2023) argues. "Training should integrate videographic analysis of playful interactions, simulations of problem-situations, and continuous reflective supervision" (Andrade, 2023, p. 112). The special phase should remember to read children's nonverbal cues that indicate the need for intervention or mediating retraction. In this way, an observational and interventionist repertoire is developed in tune with emerging needs. Therefore, training investments are indispensable.

The systematic evaluation of the impact of mediations requires multidimensional instruments, as proposed by Fonseca (2021). Video recordings of playful sessions, developed through matrices such as the LIS (Language, Interaction and Problem Solving) Scale, allow mapping advances in specific domains. In addition, evolutionary portfolios of children's productions during mediated play offer concrete evidence of development. Thus, the effectiveness of the practices is scientifically proven, legitimizing them pedagogically.

Integrated syntheses point out that mediational excellence lies in the dynamic articulation between the three pillars, as emphasized by Costa (2022). A proficient mediation during make-believe play, for example, expands vocabulary (language), negotiates plot conflicts (social), and resolves material impasses (problems) simultaneously. This holistic approach requires circular planning, where observation, intervention, and documentation feed into each other. Consequently, the potential of play as a matrix of integral development is maximized.

Critical reflection on the challenges and contradictions in the practical application of ZPD

The application of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) in pedagogical practice, although theoretically robust, faces important epistemological challenges that deserve critical analysis. According to Almeida (2021, p. 34), "the original Vygotskyan conception was often simplified into operational models that encompass the dialectical complexity between learning and development". This simplification tends to transform the ZDP into a technical leveling instrument, ignoring its relational and contextual nature. In this way, practices that should be dialogical become mechanical interventions to fill gaps. Therefore, it is urgent to rescue the procedural and non-linear character of the concept.

In this scenario, adult mediation presents paradoxes that often go unnoticed in everyday application. Santos (2023) demonstrates that planned interventions, even if well-intentioned, can transform the mediator into an executor of tasks, suffocating children's autonomy. When the adult anticipates solutions or meticulously controls the steps of the activity, he subverts the fundamental principle that ZPD arises in collaboration, not in conduction. Consequently, the child may develop cognitive dependence, contradicting the goal of promoting self-regulation. Thus, the balance between support and emancipation remains a structural challenge.

On the other hand, the identification of individual ZDPs in collective contexts is a complex operational problem. Pereira (2022) warns that the pressure for measurable results has fostered an effort to map the "zones" through standardized protocols, supervising their dynamic and localized character. "The attempt to quantify and rigidly categorize the zones of proximal development disregards their intrinsic fluidity and contextual mutability" (Pereira, 2022, p. 48). Therefore, rigid diagnostic instruments can crystallize perceptions about children's potential, reproducing inequalities. Thus, formative assessment requires flexible approaches.

In addition, the cultural dimension of ZDP is often subjugated in homogenizing practices, as criticized by Oliveira (2024). Diverse cultural repertoires influence both the expression of potentialities and effective mediation

styles, but hegemonic curricula ignore these variations. Mediators who are unaware of the cultural meanings of children's gestures may interpret behaviors as "deficits" when they are valid expressions of other symbolic universes. Consequently, culturally blind mediation can turn into epistemic violence. Thus, the decolonization of the concept becomes imperative.

In the field of inclusive education, the contradictions in the application of ZPD become particularly acute. Carvalho (2019) identifies that practices based on normalizing expectations often occur in underestimated mediations for children with disabilities. When the identification of the potential zone is contaminated by capacity biases, a self-fulfilling prophecy of limitations is created. At the same time, overestimated mediations without adequate support generate frustration. Therefore, mediation in diversity requires a break with pathologizing paradigms. In this sense, the ZPD should be resignified as a territory of plural possibilities.

Teacher training presents another critical knot, as we refer to addressing the specific issues to the operationalization of the concept. According to Ribeiro (2020), pedagogy courses often teach ZPD as a prescriptive model, not as a reflective tool, leaving teachers unprepared to deal with its practical paradoxes. "The absence of discussion about the contradictions in the application of the concept forms fragile and critically disarmed technical professionals" (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 112). Therefore, training needs to incorporate analysis of complex cases where mediation has failed. In this way, prepare yourself for ethical pedagogical decisions.

The pressure for immediate results in bureaucratized educational systems constitutes an additional obstacle, according to an analysis by Torres (2023). The logic of the ZDP requires time for the maturation of processes, but accountability policies require evidence of learning in short timeframes. This contradiction generates hasty mediations that skip essential stages of joint construction. Consequently, real development is not consolidated, generating fragile learning. Thus, instrumental rationality distorts the essence of the concept.

Nevertheless, the commodification of ZDP in the market for teaching materials represents a worrying concern. Lima (2021) denounces that publishers and educational startups sell "ZDP kits" with ready-made sequences of activities,

converting a relational principle into a packaged product. This commercialization ignores that the proximal zone constitutes the singular interaction, not universal resources. In this way, Vygotsky's pedagogy is co-opted by the logic of capital. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct the illusion that a ZDP can be purchased in packaging.

Curiously, the very notion of "development" embedded in the ZDP lacks critical problematization, as argued by Mendes (2024). Linear and Eurocentric visions of cognitive progress permeate practical applications, disregarding that developmental trajectories follow non-hierarchical paths in different cultures. When the goal of development is pre-defined by Western standards, mediation becomes an instrument of colonization. Therefore, it is urgent to pluralize the conceptions to which development should lead.

In response to such challenges, Gomes (2022) proposes the model of "sensitive mediation", which integrates constant epistemological vigilance over one's own practices. This approach requires the mediator to systematically record and reflect on: when his intervention expanded possibilities or restricted autonomy; how their cultural expectations influenced the reading of potentialities; and what unintended effects the actions produced. In this way, the practice is transformed into continuous research. Thus, reflexivity becomes an antidote to mechanical applications.

Propositional syntheses indicate that the revitalization of the concept requires the rescue of three neglected pillars: radical intersubjectivity (the ZDP as co-construction), historicity (recognition that zones are cultural products) and politicity (awareness that mediation is an ethical-political act). As Costa (2023) concludes, "to operationalize the ZDP without awareness of its internal contradictions is to reproduce, under a new theoretical veneer, banking practices that the concept sought to overcome" (p. 78). Therefore, its potency lies precisely in the critical treatment of its limits.

METHODOLOGY

The research was exclusively bibliographic, using only secondary data available in scientific publications. The documentary survey focused on the SciELO and Google Scholar platforms, using specifications of descriptors such

as "ZDP + play", "playful mediation" and "child development + Vygotsky". This approach made it possible to encompass national and international productions indexed between 2018 and 2024, establishing temporary periods aligned with recent theoretical updates.

The inclusion criteria prioritized works with full access and a valid DOI, excluding occasional abstracts or non-peer-reviewed works. Concomitantly, a thematic filter was specifically applied, selecting publications that explicitly articulated adult mediation, playful interactions, and the Vygotskyan concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. This procedure was carried out in a final corpus of 24 studies, including monographs and articles, such as the works of Alves (2020) on mediation strategies and Barros (2023) on social dynamics.

The qualitative analysis followed content analysis protocols, according to Bardin's guidelines, organized into three interdependent phases. Initially, a cross-sectional floating reading was performed to familiarize with the material, identifying recurrent thematic nuclei. Subsequently, units of meaning to practical challenges, developmental and conceptual benefits in the application of ZPD during play were explored, guided by contributions such as Fonseca (2021).

Finally, an interpretative inference was operated through the grouping by thematic layers, generating empirical categories such as "linguistic mediation", "contemporary obstacles" and "training of mediators". Each category is consolidated by crossing multiple perspectives, from reflections by Lima (2021) to practical propositions by Rocha (2019), ensuring analytical plurality.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The investigation carried out confirms that the playground constitutes a privileged space for the manifestation of the Zone of Proximal Development, operating as a dynamic matrix of children's advances. Intentionally mediated playful interactions prove to be structuring for cognitive and socio-emotional progress, materializing potentialities that activities directed in isolation do not reach. The Vygotskyan concept demonstrates full validity when anchored in the creative spontaneity of play, where challenges arise organically. In this way, playing transcends its recreational function, becoming a highly complex pedagogical device.

As for mediation strategies, it is evident that their effectiveness does not lie in a delicate balance between direction and exploratory freedom. Interventions based on attentive observation and sensitive listening obtain significant gains in linguistic and problem-solving domains, while impositions inhibit creative processes. The vocabulary expansion during symbolic games and the collaborative overcoming of material obstacles exemplify achievements possible through adequate support. Thus, proficient mediations work as practices of qualitative leaps.

However, significant challenges remain in daily operationalization, particularly with regard to adult intervention and child autonomy. Excesses of control transform mediation into tutelage, emptying the dialogical character of the ZDP, while significant absences of support generate missed opportunities. Environments with an overload of artificial stimuli and pressure for immediate results further compromise this necessary balance. Such contradictions require constant reflection on the ethical limits of teaching performance.

For consistent advances, it is essential to consider mediated play as a systemic related practice, not as an isolated technique. Its success depends on the integration between teacher training skills, adequate physical environments and understanding of children's cultural singularities. Educational systems need to create temporal and material conditions for mediations to occur without haste, respecting individual rhythms. Only through such structural transformations will the ZPD be consolidated as a guiding principle.

In a conclusive summary, the transformative potential of play as a proximal zone is fully manifested when mediators understand their function as facilitators of singular trajectories, not as conductors of standardized processes. True child advancement is measured by strengthening the ability to think, create, and relate, not by the mechanical accumulation of skills. From this perspective, mediation in play is consolidated as a political act of trust in human potentialities.

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