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CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS IN PLAYING OUTSIDE AND EXPLORING NATURE

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Abstract: Gone are the days when children played in the street without excessive concerns from adults. Currently, trapped in an anxious society, a large number of children are not free to explore alone or assess the risks of their games. Free play in nature enhances unlimited opportunities for exploration that contribute to the child's holistic development. Therefore, we present a study carried out with children aged 4 and 5 years old, which aims to understand the role of adults in playing in nature and what implications it has for children's development and learning. This is an investigative essay of a qualitative nature, which has as its starting question "What is the role of adults in playing outside and exploring nature by children?". Regarding the objectives, the aim is to understand the conceptions of parents and educators regarding children's contact with nature and to reflect on the role of adults in exploring nature. The results of this study were obtained through questionnaire surveys and interviews that reveal that adults have an active role in children's exploration of nature, from which it was concluded that adults must know how to distance themselves and adopt an observer role, allowing for the child to take risks and explore, making significant discoveries and learning, outdoors and in nature.

Keywords: Learning, Playing, Exploration, Nature, Risk

INTRODUCTION

This article resulted from a study within the scope of the master's degree in Pre-School Education, carried out at ESECS of the Polytechnic of Leiria. With this study, the aim was to understand what learning emerges from children's contact with Nature. In the study, it was also possible to verify the benefits of playing with open-ended materials for children's development and learning and to investigate and understand adults'

conceptions regarding children's contact with nature. By sharing this investigative essay, we intend to encourage and provoke future and current educators and researchers to perceive nature with its due educational and pedagogical potential.

ADULT'S ROLE IN CHILDREN'S PLAY AND EXPLORATION

Adults "are excessively concerned, and sometimes obsessive, about not allowing their children to take risks" (Neto and Lopes, 2018, p. 53). For children to become capable and autonomous adults, it is essential that parents and educators set an example of this. This way, educating based on fear and insecurities transmits to the child a lack of confidence in themselves and in the adult.

According to Ferland (2006), observing a child's play does not remove the importance of playing with them. By playing together, parents and children create rich interactions, discover each other, enjoy different moments together and parents relearn how to play and reduce stress. The same author also emphasizes that it is the adult's role to play with the child so that the child sees him or her as a model, in order to replicate movements and games, managing to evolve in a satisfactory way. This way, when the adult accompanies and plays with the child, it allows the child to feel the pleasure of playing.

For Bilton, Bento and Dias (2017), it is up to the educator and everyone who comes into contact with children to contribute to awakening curiosity. Therefore, "it is important to value and create opportunities so that the feeling of discovery is present in the learning process, promoting a curious and exploratory attitude from an early age" (p. 28). According to the same authors, another of the functions of reference adults is, without a doubt, to take care of the natural space and transmit this care and respect for the environment to the

child. This way, you will be more alert to the problems inherent to sustainability and the environment.

Neto (2020) considers that it is up to parents to take the opportunity to build positive routines to promote playing at home and on the street. It is essential that children increase their contact with nature and play more outdoors. However, this only happens if parents are available to spend that time with their children. Listening to children is essential, according to Neto (2020), it allows you to understand them and understand their needs, namely, contact with nature, play materials, forms of exploration; regarding the quality of exploration activities, understand the essence of explorations, motor discovery (such as walking, running, jumping), construction games and sporting activities.

THE RISK OF PLAYING

Risk promotes a feeling of overcoming limits, an increase in self-esteem and confidence. Thus, Bilton, Bento & Dias (2017) argue that, despite the risk being imminent, it is much healthier to take the risk, benefiting from everything it entails, rather than protecting the child unnecessarily. Neto (2020) understands that the notion of risk is often associated with dangerous behaviors that can cause superficial or irreversible damage that must be avoided. Still, it is important for full and balanced development, as only when children are faced with obstacles and difficulties do they become capable of overcoming them. All learning requires repetition and adaptation to risk, promoting gains in resilience and subsequent success.

Thus, according to Neto and Lopes (2018), all the pressure and overprotection imposed by parents will have future consequences, as it takes away the child's ability to live more happy moments and experience challenging situations, "playing is gaining confidence in

yourself (security) and the best way to avoid the accident" (p. 55). Risk promotes safety, yet this is a difficult premise to accept, making children imprisoned in their own bodies. Risky playing is an added value because it allows children to test dangers and confront what they do not know, only then will they become autonomous and confident in their behaviors and ideas (Neto and Lopes, 2018). Corroborating this idea, Hanscom (2018) states that when exposure to risk is limited, children lose opportunities to develop and learn. Therefore, the author argues that, instead of hindering children, parents must encourage them to take risks gradually, allowing them to develop physical and mental skills that are essential for the child's safety. Reinforcing this idea, Neto (2020) states that too much protection from adults prevents the development of skills in childhood. Thus, fears expressed verbally or gesturally by adults convey a lack of confidence and insecurity in situations of confrontation with adversity.

In short, Hanscom (2018, p.12) states that "a dose of calculated risk and symbolic play is essential not only for physical health, but for the development of young, self-oriented minds." It is essential to control and calculate risks, even so, Neto (2020) argues that these can only be made aware of if children have the opportunity to experience sufficiently challenging experiences.

METHODOLOGICAL OPTIONS

We can consider this study a qualitative investigation, where the interactions that occur in nature are analyzed and described, as well as the conceptions that exist in relation to the problem are understood. We can also consider that in the analysis of surveys, techniques more suited to quantitative research were used, crossing quantitative and qualitative data. It is considered a case study, given that an in-depth analysis of a certain

group is carried out. According to Coutinho (2013), the case study is considered an in-depth, intensive study that is limited in time and space, where the researcher collects information in detail.

The seven children aged between four and five years old who participated in the study were chosen for convenience. We chose this sample because they are very interested in playing outside and exploring elements of nature. The educator, around fifty years old, graduated from the Piaget Institute and also participates in the investigative trial, as we believe that she has an essential role in understanding some key concepts in the study. Of the twenty-five parents to whom the survey was sent, thirteen were willing to participate in the study, contributing favorably with important data.

Regarding data collection and analysis techniques, participant observation was used. According to Vilelas (2009), participant observation is called natural observation, given that the observer belongs to the human group that he investigates, that is, as the researcher is among the participants and does not need to make any effort to investigate and understand what needs. Using technology, not only direct observation was made, but also indirect observation with the recording of photographs and videos.

To understand the conceptions of the children and the educator, an interview was chosen, with open questions so that they could better express themselves. Semi-structured interviews, with a guide of questions, but also with space to ask others that eventually emerged and with the possibility of reformulating the rest, depending on the involvement of the focus group. Another technique used in this study was a questionnaire survey of parents.

Having said that, and after all the data had been collected, it was necessary to carry out a content analysis of the videos, content

analysis of the interviews with the educator and children and the survey with parents. This analysis of records allows us to categorize and consequently understand the role of adults when exploring nature by children.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

NATURE THAT INSPIRES

In the survey of parents, when confronted with the concept of nature, there were many significant answers: "Everything that is not built by man. Clean air, freedom, green spaces and animals"; "Green space with diverse living beings, from plants to animals, in their most natural state" is "life" (Survey: Pais, 1005- 2021). Throughout the analysis of these responses it is possible to understand that in the concept of nature, despite being a little vague, there is something that parents are very aware of, which is the fact that it is "the natural world, without human intervention" (Survey: Parents, 10 -05-2021).

The educator defined Nature as an inexhaustible source of learning that enhances development and global learning. For this educator, nature is something useful for everyone's daily life and essential to life, as it promotes balance. Throughout the interview it was mentioned that Nature is a way of promoting the child's holistic development and harmonious growth, as it is responsible for the development of social, cognitive, motor and sensory skills. From the educator's perspective, playing in Nature is important, noting that "... it means being free, happy, creative and resilient."

Constant questioning as well as the stimulation of curiosity and the dialogue that is established between the educator and the child is essential for the development and learning of children, in this sense, according

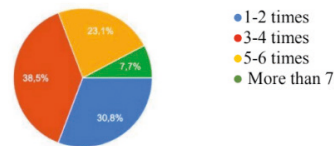
to Tovey (2007, p.142), the type of questions posed by the adult are often perceived by children as situations of evaluation and testing and not so much as situations of openness to questioning and discovery. Despite this, it is important to understand the value of the dialogue established between the educator and the child. Bilton, Bento and Dias (2017) emphasize the need to understand the connection between language and thought, promoting opportunities for children to learn and make sense of the world through dialogue.

Throughout the interviews, children mentioned that when they play in the street there is always an adult accompanying them, either their parents or teachers, but they do not always play with the child, they just observe. Ferland (2006) argues that, sometimes, the presence and proximity of an adult is a positive attitude when the child shows a need for this support. The educator believes that she has a very important role in promoting children's contact with nature, as she sees nature as a privileged way for children to get to know themselves and the world.

It is unanimous that children enjoy being in natural environments and that parents consider that they have a central role in their children's exploration of nature and that is why they take their children to play outside. According to Neto (2020), it is in the hands of adults to provide quality time outdoors, children need to be encouraged to explore and play in nature and from what is observed in the study results, this happens daily. There are even those (father interviewed) who consider that exploring nature must be viewed in the same way as "other types of activities". It will be important to create a routine to provide these moments. Only by example can this routine be created" (Survey: Parents, 10-05-2021). It is up to leading adults to enjoy time outdoors, play with children in nature and explore, as children learn through observation, repetition

and example. When confronted with the regularity with which they take their children to play outside, the vast majority reported that they leave the house more than twice a week to play and explore with their children outside. This happens because they consider that "it is important to provide this contact with nature"

10. How many times a week do you go with your child to play and explore outside? 13 answers



Graphic 1

Exploration Abroad.

Regarding playing outside in adverse conditions (meaning rain, snow, wind, cold, etc.), nine of the thirteen parents who responded stated that they allow the exploration of nature in these conditions, with the rest not allowing it citing the risk of illness. When this happens, it is essential to safeguard the child's health and, therefore, they claim to take care, such as "appropriate clothing", "being comfortable and allowing them to enjoy nature" (Survey: Parents, 10-05-2021), there is also an attitude more relaxed from a father who states that he takes little care because he is used to it and normally "plays ball in the rain and I don't worry, it's good for him" (Survey: Parents, 10-05-2021). According to Neto (2020, p. 157), this is "also an excellent opportunity to teach children to be able to face adverse weather conditions, selecting the appropriate clothing for walking in the rain, cold and heat". The author also considers that exploration and playing outside in adverse conditions develop the child's immune system. The educator interviewed was also asked about the adverse conditions and the fact that children can explore Nature on those days, she replied that the exploration

of the natural world takes place throughout the year, which is why there are suitable clothes and footwear and it is up to the educator or parent adjust. Still, it was essential for the study to understand whether or not children like playing in the rain. Of the children who were interviewed, only two mentioned that they liked the sensation of rain while playing, one of them stated that she had never experienced that same sensation.

However, learning does not only emerge from adverse conditions, so when watching the video: "Nature - Shadow" we understand that sunny days also give rise to opportunities for play and learning. As Bilton, Bento and Dias (2017) point out, a sunny day can be an inspiration for different explorations.

Video description: Nature – Shadow

Two children were playing with each other when, suddenly, one of them looks at the ground and sees his shadow "look, it's the shadow, it's here in front and it looks like a big monster! But don't be afraid Carolina, it's just the sun that's behind me and creates a shadow!"

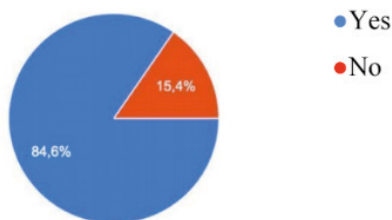
During this short conversation, one of the children reveals that he is fully aware of what light and shadow are, and as his friend is not, he decides to explain it to her. Empathy, respect for others, explanation of results and events are learning that this moment has triggered. In this case, the observer, as well as the educator, remained silent, allowing the child to explain the phenomenon. According to Neto and Lopes (2018), it is essential for adults to know how to distance themselves whenever it is not necessary, preventing the inhibition of the child's value. On the other hand, sometimes it is children who seek out adults only to value or protect the child in certain behavior, as can be seen in several videos. For example, when they were playing in a risky way, one of the children, a little less confident in their play, called the adult so that she could somehow guarantee their safety.

Regarding risky playing, the children were questioned revealing which risky games they like to do, such as climbing the roof of the wooden house, climbing trees and climbing down the iron. During the interview, they considered that, despite being their favorite games, they are very afraid of the risk, "I'm afraid of walking too fast, because I'm afraid of falling" (E7: Eva, 26-04-2021). Risky playing is, for this group of children, a little difficult (they say) "getting down the iron is difficult and risky" (E1: Pedro, 18-04-2021), "riding the tire swing is difficult" (E3: Isabel, 19-04-2021). Regarding the category of fears, the educator states that she always has some fear, mainly because she has an increased responsibility for the children, however, she does not allow her fears to be a barrier to the child's dynamic exploration. As for risky playing, she confesses that her answer is a little ambiguous, because, despite recognizing that this type of playing results in significant learning, the educator still does not observe great added value in risk. Given this response and the difficulties experienced in children's risky play, it can be said that this may be due to the lack of encouragement for risky play in the educational context. According to Hanscom (2018, p. 130) "when we prevent children from experiencing new sensations that they freely seek, they may not develop the senses and motor skills necessary to take risks without getting hurt".

PLAY RISKY

Regarding the issue of risky play, parents were asked about permission for this type of play, to which eleven guardians stated that they let their children play at some risk because "it is part of growing up", because "calculated risk is important to give responsibility" and because it is essential to "climb trees, run in open space".

21. Do you allow your child to play at any risk? 13 answers



Graph 2

Play Risky.

As parents mentioned, calculated risk is an added value for the development of child responsibility, but not only that, Hanscom (2018) considers that when adults do not interfere in their explorations, the experience of taking a risk is enriched and enhanced. Videos were analyzed where some children played in a risky way, infecting and encouraging their friends to do the same. As mentioned in the interviews, most children love to climb the wooden house, in this video they decided to jump from the roof of that house to the ground, over and over again until they infected and encouraged the rest of the children to jump. According to Bilton, Bento and Dias (2017), when children prepare to jump, they activate their body to deal with the challenge and risk. Some of the parents (eight) reported having some fears when playing outside and exploring nature, such as “animal bites” and “getting hurt” (Survey: Parents, 10-05-2021), reflecting the fears of society in general.

BENEFITS AND LEARNINGS

The educator promotes activities involving contact with Nature because she believes in its potential as a source of learning full of benefits for children. The harmonious and reflective growth that is stimulated through contact, allows you to create, recreate, invent, imagine, discover, dream, feel, etc... These

activities can be planned or not, but the exploration of nature takes place both inside and outside the activity room. For example, bringing something into the room that adds to and stimulates children’s development and learning, going “outside, to the woods, to the countryside, to the vegetable garden, to the grape harvest, to the pine forest, to the farm” because he considers that “contact with nature and the elements that belong to it are fundamental to the child’s happiness, development and learning” (E8: Ed. Ana, 07-06-2021). As argued by Coelho et.al. (2015) contact with nature promotes moments of development and learning in a holistic way, valuing the child’s involvement with the natural environment.

During the analysis of the survey there were unanimous responses from parents, for example, to the question of whether contact with nature is beneficial for children, all parents responded yes and they all consider that while their children play with and in nature they are to develop and learn. Like the educator, one of the parents made a very pertinent observation (exploration) “it is fundamental to get in touch and feel nature, to get to know the world” (Survey: Parents, 10-05-2021), this way it is understood that contact with nature is a way to get to know the world. There are also those who consider that contact with nature is beneficial for both parties, that is, that it benefits the child, but also for nature, “dealing with nature and developing respect for it” (Survey: Parents, 10 -05-2021). This way, it can be seen that the greater the contact with nature, the greater the respect that the child has for it and, therefore, the better the care that will be given to it. As Bilton, Bento and Dias (2017) state, when contact with Nature is frequent, children are also alerted to preservation and care for it.

After viewing several options where improvements could occur in terms of

development and learning, all guardians mentioned knowledge of the world and visual arts as the areas that benefited most from children's contact with nature. Still, many reported benefits in personal and social training, as well as physical education. Between 50 and 60% of respondents do not find contact with nature beneficial for development and learning in terms of language and approach to writing, mathematics, visual arts, dramatic play, music and dance. According to Mesquita (2017), learning happens holistically, stimulating different domains, motor (pleasure of movement), cognitive (sense of space), language (development of oral and communicational language), creativity and aesthetic sense (expressions and appreciations of different forms of art), the personal, social and emotional (self-awareness) and the sensorial (development of the five senses).

Regarding the learning that emerges from children's contact with nature, the educator states that this awakens different stimuli, that it develops the child's personality and values, that it stimulates autonomy, self-esteem, security in choice and a critical spirit. Disagreeing, the children said they thought they didn't learn while playing with nature. For this reason, it was decided to ask the question in another way: "What does Nature teach you while you play?" Thus, regarding teachings, two children state that the greatest lessons they acquire when playing with Nature are how to care for it, "teach not to pluck flowers" (E2, Carolina, 19-04-2021), "Teach that we must be delicate" (E3, Isabel, 1904-2021). What the children responded also refers to the role that each person has in preserving Nature. Therefore, the children revealed that they know that there is a role and function for each person, so that they can help improve the natural world. Take care of Nature, "give it the things it has to have, like water" (E1, Pedro, 18-04- 2021), don't pluck the flowers "so they

don't get damaged, only the ones that are loose I can get it" (E2, Carolina, 04/19/2021). Thus, rectifying the question, it is understood that some of the learning that children identify relates to caring for nature, but also to the games they play in the street.

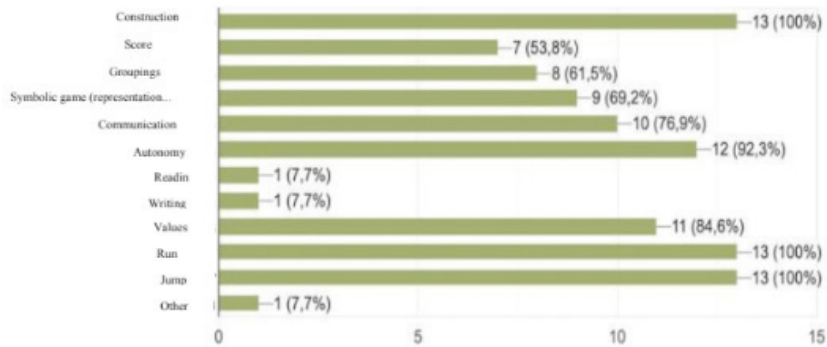
From the educator's perspective, through the projects that arise from this contact with Nature, various types of learning are also triggered, as well as the selection, grouping and counting of natural elements (for example). Furthermore, she states that OCEPE have a wealth of learning that fits into this moment of contact with Nature. When asked about the benefits, the interviewee said that there are benefits at all levels: emotional, cognitive and physical. Many of these come from the diversity and richness of educational experiences that emerge from this contact with Nature such as projects and investigations.

Parents also had the opportunity to mention learning that they believe emerges from contact with Nature. In a verification question where respondents could choose several options, construction, running and jumping were unanimous choices, symbolic play, values and autonomy were chosen by the vast majority. Learning related to mathematics was chosen by approximately half of the people surveyed, leaving learning related to reading and writing with just one answer.

When analyzing these data, it is understood that parents have some difficulty in observing learning in mathematics and Portuguese that may emerge from the child's contact with nature. However, comparing the data collected in the interviews with the analysis of videos of children's games, it is possible to see that the most significant learning that emerged from that game abroad is mostly in the field of mathematics.

16. In your opinion, what learning emerges from contact with nature?

13 answers



Graphic 4

Learning that emerges from contact with Nature.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the perception of the parents' and the educator's conceptions about Nature, it was found that the parents' definition is different from the educator's definition, perhaps due to the perspective from which it is viewed. Parents believe that Nature is everything that is not in the hands of Man, that it is a natural world, where animals and plants belong. From the educator's perspective, she sees Nature as an inexhaustible source of learning, which stimulates the child's development and harmonious growth. Regarding the educational experiences that emerge from contact with Nature, the educator considers that Nature is a motivation for various explorations, as well as for the development of projects. She also considers it pertinent that children leave the classroom and school to explore Nature, as she herself says, going on study visits, going to the woods, the garden, the harvest, the farm, provides significant learning experiences for the youngest children. new. From the parents' point of view, it was understood that they consider that taking care of animals, taking care of plants, as well as going outside and playing in nature, are excellent educational experiences, which

stimulate and provide significant learning for children.

Regarding the objective of reflecting on the role of parents and the educator in exploring nature, it was found that the educator considers that she has an important role in promoting children's contact with the natural environment, in order to get to know them and to the world. It was clear that parents also play an active role when taking their children to play outside. Regarding the exploration of Nature under adverse conditions, it was found that both parents and educators allow children to play outside in these conditions, whilst safeguarding the children's health. It was possible to reflect on the role of adults when videos of explorations and games abroad were analyzed. From these records, it was possible to understand that the distance that adults have in these moments is also essential for children to be comfortable and free to explore and take risks. Still, as the educator and parents mentioned, it is also a responsibility to have children in our care, at the risk of getting hurt.

With the culmination of this investigative essay, it was realized that it would be beneficial to reflect on risky play. Thus, it was possible to verify that the educator, as she did not see

great benefits in this risk, the children did not practice it regularly and, therefore, when they did it they felt difficulty. Regarding fears, after carrying out the study, it was found that they fall on the responsibility of having children in

charge and fear of them getting hurt. Even so, parents revealed that they allow this type of play, claiming that it is an added value for the child's autonomy and responsibility.

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