

Play and Literacy: Six-year-old Children in Elementary Education

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Abstract The investigation of play and literacy was based on monitoring data of five classes of six-year-old children from 2006 to 2010, and an analysis of the teaching plan: performance records of children, interviews with parents; oral testimony of children, teacher records and reports from the toy library. The data indicates the relevance of the curriculum with activity, mediation and use of imaginary play and games with the support of signs and artifacts. The research found that mediation is most appropriate when there are two teachers for implementing activities related to the pedagogy of games for literacy.

Keywords Play, Literacy, Elementary Education

1. Introduction

The study addresses the use of play and games in literacy for children of six years in the elementary school¹ and the analysis of the concepts of activity, play and mediation, under the historical-cultural perspective.

The changes in the education system that incorporated six-year-old children - who previously attended pre-school at that age - into elementary school justifies the need to prepare proposals for adapting the education of these children through play and the acquisition of new knowledge that is required for entering elementary school level. The experiment was conducted by means of the collaborative work of researchers and teachers of the School of Education at the University of São Paulo (FEUSP) and the Application School (EA).

The intention to expand the elementary school period from eight to nine years had already been announced in the National Education Law of Guidelines and Bases no. 9394/96. In 2001, the National Education Plan indicated the national education goal of bringing forward the compulsory, free education to the age of six. This public policy began to be planned in 2004, and was included in the texts published in subsequent years, and 2010 was established as the limit for its deployment throughout the country.

The reasoning for the expansion of primary education to nine years is based on the urgency of building an inclusive, civic, supportive and quality school for all, and on greater time spent in school[1,2,3].

The Ministry of Education intended to implement policy changes in school structure, in the reorganization of school time and space, and in the manners to teach, learn, evaluate, organize and develop the curriculum, and to work with knowledge, respecting the uniqueness of human development[1,2,3].

The nine-year Elementary School goals were defined as: to improve the fairness and quality conditions of basic education; to structure a new elementary school for children to proceed in their studies, achieving a higher educational level and to have more time for literacy[3].

The new elementary school requires its own educational project at curricular level, as mentioned in document no. 24/2004[4]:

[...] Education and school systems shall match the new elementary school situation of supply and duration to a teaching proposal that is appropriate to the age of six years, especially in terms of organization of school time and space, also considering adequate furniture, equipment and human resources.

The Office of Basic Education published the *Nine-Year Basic Education: Guidelines for the inclusion of children aged six* documents in 2006, addressing issues that call the attention to the coming of topics that have historically been distant from the schooling curriculum, such as play/leisure and literacy.

Playing is seen as "a way of being in the world[...] the one and only legitimate expression of childhood[...] one of the principles for educational practice" that must be present "in time and space at the school and classrooms[...] in the years/grades of nine-year elementary education "[5] p.10. It also shows the exclusivity of literacy in the first years of elementary education, at the expense of other areas of knowledge as being "an educational incoherence"[5] p.10.

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Another issue that appears in the discussions is the need to revise the curricular organization for nine-year elementary education.

This case represents an example of a team's own efforts to develop a proposal, or a particular initiative, isolated from the context of public policy for the other schools in the State. This paper will highlight the use of play and games for literacy in oral language, writing and mathematics.

The qualitative nature research[6] was based on data gathered in the 1st grade elementary education class from 2006 to 2010, conducted by the same teacher, focusing on the teaching plan, on student performance records, interviews with parents, and testimonies of children in 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010, and also on ninety-nine reports of the Toys and Pedagogical Materials Laboratory (LABRIMP) describing the experiences of these children in the toy library.

2. The Application School: Research Context

The context of research defined was the School of Education at the University of São Paulo Application School (EA-FEUSP), the curriculum plan, the teacher practice and the education of six-year-old children. The school was founded in 1959 by the National Institute of Educational Studies, the Ministry of Education and Culture and was incorporated into the University of São Paulo in 1972, and provides nine-year elementary education (since 2006) and secondary education (since 1985).

When The Application School proposed an appropriate education plan for this new reality in 2005, it anticipated future legal requirements. The challenge was to create a new curricular structure that differed from the one offered to children entering the first grade of the eight-year elementary school, who spent most of the four-hour tuition period inside the classroom, living with a curriculum model containing two Science, two History and Geography, six Mathematics and six Portuguese classes with little space for play and games.

With the expansion of the elementary school to nine years, the 1st grade began receiving children of 6 years of age or to be completed, which required compliance to this "new" public, with the consideration of structural (classroom, hiring of professionals) and educational (restructuring of the curriculum restructuring, planning, proposed activities, monitoring and evaluation) aspects.

It was clear that the 1st grade classroom could not be "an anticipation of the previous 1st grade and replicate its curriculum" (Education Plan, 2007, p. 1), as "working with a new age group requires the creation of a course that respects their specificities" (p. 3), according to guidelines of the "Leontiev activity theory" adopted by the team, for supporting the new proposal and for "enhancing internal motivation of children in the search of goals and actions directed to the pursuit of objectives" (Education Plan, 2007,

p.1.). Such assumptions require a proposal that will be different from the previous curricular structuring model by disciplines, which usually favors the transmissive education given by an adult. The core of the curriculum is based on the concept of an activity that sees learning as a result of a child's internal reasons, which arise in the social context. "The respect for the children's characteristics and needs" (Education Plan, 2007, p. 1) which are transferred from preschool to school, means to preserve their rights, the maintenance of the main preschool activity which is playing, added to games and the use of signs and artifacts, features of Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective[7,8], which provides features that will be detailed in this study.

The teaching plan for the first grade has goals in the field of languages, mathematics and natural sciences and humanities, based on play and literacy. The Portuguese language or math are not thought of in disciplinary mode, but the goal is to develop activities that are integrated, the different languages considered, so that the child may have contact with multiple cultural references (Education Plan, 2007).

The weekly time period is not segmented into areas such as mathematics, Portuguese, science, history, geography, art and physical education, the typical elementary school curricula. The new configuration suits interdisciplinary projects. Literacy and the integration of languages appear at all times of routine activities that integrate in the library, in history groups, in play and games, in the production of collective text, in time and in space of arts, in movement, in moments for singing, reading and writing music, in accounts which use stories, songs and rimes. The park and the vegetable patch create opportunities for socialization and imaginative and scientific exploration, and play can occur at any point of time every week, with dedicated space for their use.

Mediations between children, adults and objects are planned during the literacy and mathematics games, the history and news groups, in times of text creation, with cultural supports for the understanding of these fields, added to experimentation with arts, physical education, gardening and singing. Children have the right to use toys and games in the toy library and park, which are important spaces for observing their interests and needs, in order to expand the experience.

The culture of confining children[9] "only inside the classroom," is broken while internal and external spaces of the school and the university are used for the purpose of educating through visits to museums, the toy library and the use of games and play. The adult-centered perspective gives way to listening to children[10], with a specific time in the week called "Did You Know?", which resulted in new curriculum changes. The agitation in the 1st basic education cycle classes led to the creation of two schedules: a break for children (1st and 2nd grades) and another one for the older children (3rd, 4th and 5th grades), resulting from the observation that children are not all the same, and require differentiated attention and spaces.

Games and materials for lettering: name badges, bingo (letters of the names, letters, first letter of words, kitchen items, numbers), a language game called *bate-bate alfabeto* (knock-knock alphabet) where the letters form pairs, the alphabet's route, lotto for reading, the alphabet game in the yard, the challenge of figures (written with movable letters), the use of lettering sets and stencils, writing and drawing with chalk in the yard, logic blocks, dominoes, card games, rimes, travel game, playing numbers game in the yard, toothpick games, and others.

The integration of playing and the mediation of culture with the introduction of the letters and the number occur in the Park, in free motor activities, and, inside the classroom, in the curricular time called Spaces, with other optional languages, with building games, rules, writing, drawing, cutting/pasting, reading, counting and modeling. The right to play is granted during fortnightly visits to the Toy Library at LABRIMP (Toys and Educational Materials Laboratory). Moments of free creation of words and texts, storytelling, reading different types of texts - either brought by the teacher or by the children -, visits to the library, with individual readings and/or reading in small groups and in fortnightly loans of books, there is always the culture of shared play among peers and moments of culture mediation.

3. Activity, Play and Mediation

The concepts of activity, play and mediation, under the historical-cultural perspective adopted by the teacher, subsidizes the teaching plan for the new six-year-old entrants to elementary school and directs the conduct of their curriculum practices.

The concept of activity derives from dialectical materialism, and was introduced into the psychological theory by Vygotsky and subsequently analyzed by Sergei L. Rubinshtein and Aleksei N. Leontiev. The term *activity* can be better understood in Davydov's monograph Problems of Developmental Teaching, considered by Szekely editors to be "the best work on the subject." [11] p.3.

According to Davydov, the concept of activity appeared historically with the activity of work produced by man - from the reflections on "change-oriented goals and changes [...] on human practice" (p.9). The activity is related to representation, the awareness of the needs and motives of the inner human being. To play relying on the child's internal needs and motivations becomes a specific form of activity, but differs from productive work, as it is a representation.

The relationship between playing and activities for children is clear in Vygotsky's theory[7]: "playing as an imaginary situation differs substantially from work and other forms of activity" (p. 93), as it is one of the "subcategories of playing" (p.94) that involves a "rules-based" (p.98) mental action of awareness which allows "the achievement of trends that cannot be immediately gratified" (p. 94).

Free playing, which requires actions consistent with the played role, brings constraint, which is imposed as a rule.

The context provides a standard of culture, indicating the role of motherhood, the representation model, which applies as a rule for imaginary play. The rule becomes internal through the self-determination to be a mother, and the child learns to control its immediate desires, creating "the great leap in this development, which is the separation between action and meaning"[7] p.100. In this leap, the meaning commands the child's action, turning a broomstick into a horse, a doll into a daughter. This change is "the main development factor" (p.101) which leads to build new mental functions, typical of the zone of proximal development. The wish that is impossible to become true, "to be a mother," is satisfied in play when it complies with the social rules that define that role. Using rules in play is a constant throughout childhood, and it follows the types of play proposed by Vygotsky[7]. The role of the rules is essential in the learning process by requiring integrated perception, memory, attention and mental actions to find the symbolic representations chosen by the child to express the game. In this process we learn to symbolize, to give meaning to things and situations.

At the end of nursery school or at the beginning of preschool, the child makes the baby sleep, as it sees the mother do, like the situation observed in a Japanese nursery, where a twin child sings lullabies to two dolls at the same time, with one "baby" in each hand, lying side by side on quilts, using "more memory in the action than a new imaginary situation"[7] p. 103. As the child progresses in its development, the goals improve and it gains flexibility and creativity by inserting a number of situations in its imagination, not just those nearby. Imagination increasingly gains power: a chair is not just for sitting on, but also for giving the baby a bottle, and later it turns into a train. At the end of preschool and during early elementary school, imagination is enriched with details of everyday life, requiring actions to be consistent with reality data.

"Playing does not die down at school age, but it is geared to reality"[7] p.104, developing with the use of cultural artifacts. Among the most appropriate playing methods at preschool and at the beginning of elementary school we can point out: 1-an imaginary situation of acts close to the child; 2-a diversified imaginary situation, at the height of the flexibility of the symbol; 3-an imaginary situation facing matters of reality, and 4-games and activities with the support of signs and language.

For the construction of a way to educate, a curriculum or a specific pedagogy for literacy[12], the historical-cultural perspective, as proposed in the school's plan, is also necessary for incorporating the notion of mediation, the most important concept for guiding the educational process, which contains goals to pursue.

Mediations can be done by individuals (children and adults), objects (toys and materials), or artifacts such as signs and language, which mobilize thought, generating actions of symbolic representation[8,13,14] material configuration, such as mnemonic techniques, counting systems, algebraic symbols, artwork, sketches, diagrams, maps, drawings, and

those of psychological nature, such as internal psychological functions, which are mobilized when conducted by the child itself[11].

Signs, markings, written codes and drawings "are the result of a complex development process[...] which combines in itself the natural and cultural things in the child's behavior "[8] p. 9, i.e. to play with the use of signs includes both the child's interests and needs and the cultural and symbolic elements of society.

Toothpicks and balls to score points in games, travel games using houses with beans or tops, gestures and sounds, dominoes, memory, cards with names of children, representation of objects, animals and events to increase awareness of everyday situations. Identifying written codes, signs, traffic signs, or street or supermarket signs is one of the tasks of early childhood education, which should continue in elementary school, following the literacy process[15], considering the games or mediation as a social practice of assignment of meaning (Smith, 1998) and reading the world[16].

The impact of the sign in the child's mind only occurs when the action of establishing meaning is carried out by the child when there is "construction of internal control"[17], i.e. when an agency occurs, as shown in research[17- 21] that investigates literacy as a social practice that includes playing culture, mediation and appropriate resources, which begins at nursing school and continues in elementary school.

4. Imaginary Play Directed at Reality

The records of scholarship students who monitor six-year-old children at the studied school indicate that imaginary play directed at reality prevail.

In the playroom, a child in the construction area explains the difference between "real dinosaurs", such as Triceratops and T-Rex, and "dino-mutants" inspired by cartoons. The child starts a mock fight between three dinosaurs of the "Triceratops" family (mother and two daughters) and a T-Rex who kidnapped one of the daughters and put a chip into her brain, to keep her from remembering her mother. There are, in the mock fight, typologies of the type of fight of dinosaurs merged with other data from reality, such as the inclusion of chips in the brain that affect memory (LABRIMP report, 20/03/2007).

A girl admires the long hair of the scholarship student and invites her to go to the fantasy salon on the corner, gives her a haircut, puts a crown on her head and puts on lipstick for her to look pretty. She asks when the student will return and sets an appointment for Friday, so she can be ready for the weekend. Shortly afterwards, the child looks for the student, warning her that she is late, grabs her by the hand and leads her to the mirror, making a new hairstyle with colorful appliques she says she bought, because the scholarship student had mentioned last time that she would like to use them, but there were none in the salon. This sequence of actions approaches real, everyday beauty salon situations (LABRIMP report, 03/27/2007).

Children six years old create imaginary situations in great detail. Girls playing in the medical area distribute roles of medical assistant and patient, including "cesarean-normal" childbirth delivery complications with a doll slow to arrive. While two girls play to organize a small store, two boys do a robbery, creating a disturbance similar to real life (LABRIMP report, 10/03/2010). Such situations of mixed play between boys and girls[22] show the diversity of roles and themes that are close to the real context.

Imagination is integrated into the planned activities. It is not a case of separating playing from not playing. The approach enhances learning, as demonstrated by the biunivocal correspondence activity in counting to 10, with the use of "The neighbor's chicken" rime, and a surprise box with a plush chicken inside. The challenge was to find out what was inside the box. "Yes," "no", "more or less" are verbal responses to situation classifications. Faced with questions such as: "Is it a pencil?", or "Is it a book?", the tips narrow down the universe of possibilities: "It's an animal," "It does not live in the sea", "It has two legs", "It has two wings", "It lays eggs." When they discover it is a chicken, the teacher gives life to the plush chicken in symbolic play, and dialogues with the children:

- "Wow! I've stayed long enough in that box! "
- "Is everything all right with you?"

In the dialogue, "Mrs. Chicken" (teacher) begins to sing the rime about the chicken, which is about counting eggs, and the kids continue, showing that they already dominate the repertoire. "Mrs. Chicken" tells the children she is very sad because she lost her 10 eggs, and suggests that they make some with modeling clay for her to hatch. The children accept the proposal and begin to work. "Mrs. Chicken" starts counting "... 1.2" together with each child who finishes. "Mrs. Chicken" suggests that the children, who had already made the 10 small eggs, build a nest to hold the eggs, while circulating around the room to meet new demands (Teacher records, 2010, p. 11).

The "Mrs. Chicken" character, in the form of a stuffed animal that talks to the children, gives support to the imaginary situation, and creates a climate of involvement, attention and concentration, with various languages: visual, dimensional, mathematical, verbal, added to signs (rime singing, counting and modeling eggs), which work as external support for the understanding of numerical correspondence. The teacher noted that most children sang rhymes (the sound and rhythm used in the pronunciation of numbers help the representation of the eggs), modeled the eggs and verified the amount by counting to ten, others realized mistakes and made adjustments, checking them with "Mrs. Chicken," and a few of them were singing without using the representation (Teacher records, 2010, p.12). Awareness of the meaning of numbers, acquired in the context of action, is what characterizes the activity, under the historical-cultural approach discussed by Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Davydov, differing from mechanical and repetitive actions out of context, which are typical of transmissive pedagogies.

5. Mediations in Curricular Practices

Mediations for literacy in curricular practices conducted by the teacher will be analyzed using the three methods proposed by Vygotsky: subject, object and artifacts [8]. Since mediation can occur within the context of playing and not playing, several situations were selected from the daily practices of the groups surveyed from 2006 to 2010, in which the playing continues, integrating the use of cultural artifacts and the actions of adults.

One of the teacher's challenges for discovering the children's prior knowledge is an example of the use of materials, with movable letters that are used for diagnosing children's difficulties and to check the level of knowledge of the Portuguese language. The monitoring of the teacher's practice demonstrates the use of rating levels for children in the acquisition of writing, pre-syllabic, syllabic, syllabic - alphabetic and alphabetic levels, according to the nomenclature adopted by Ferreiro and Teberosky based on the Piagetian theory[23].

The free use of material, the first step toward children's discoveries[24], indicates the diversity of exploration: some use the material ignoring the lyrics, enchanted with the possibility of building houses and towers, or lining up the pieces giving them a "domino effect", others use pieces to write words or make a badge to copy their names. Some children already write and others are in the stage called pre-syllabic. There are the ones who delight in writing their name and those of their loved ones. The majority of pre-syllabic children show great interest in writing correctly, constantly asking for help from an adult (Teacher records, 2010).

Rimes and rhymes subsidize the writing initially through the sounding of words, a stage that precedes writing. In the "hunting rhymes" play the teacher records the words "identified by children" and concludes that they take ownership of the concept in different manners: "the pre-syllabic and syllabic children perceived rhymes by reading, or in the sounding of words" (Teacher records, 2010, p.9) in a way of phonological conscience. To many children, two words that begin with the same letter have already formed a rhyme: "Hey, teacher, *HISTÓRIA* and *HORTA* (HISTORY and VEGETABLE PATCH). They rhyme!" (p.9), pointing to the initial letter of the two. In this case letter recognition prevails by visual perception. The syllabic - alphabetic and alphabetic children perceived rhymes by writing (Teacher records, 2010).

Considering the three rhymes found: *ASSUSTADO* – *AMARRADO* (SCARED-TIED); *DELICADO* – *MALVADO* (Delicate-Evil); *Fantasiado*–*Alucinado* (DISGUISED – HALLUCINATED), a pre-syllabic child observes the sound of the word: "Look! Everything has *ADO*. "Another recalls the refrain of a funk song, "*ADO, ADO, ADO, cada um no seu QUADRADO.*" The teacher says: "Guys, *QUADRADO* (SQUARE) also ends with *ADO*." The girl who sang the refrain is dazzled by the discovery and requests the recording of the word: "Write, teacher! " (Teacher records, 2010, p. 9).

These records indicate that children considered pre-syllabic and syllabic rely on the illustrations and in memory of the sounds to read "their way". On the other hand, syllabic-alphabetic and alphabetic children use memory and perception, images, and attention in an integrated manner[8] to decode and read the letters conventionally, consistent with the meanings established by culture.

In the words game from keywords specified by the teacher, the children create new texts, generating stories considered "crazy", fun and collective such as "The baker and the goat":

The baker was selling bread. Then he paused to mark his birthday on the calendar. The goat appeared, tore the baker's calendar and ate all the bread. The baker was angry and climbed on the goat. The goat gave the baker a kick. Then the goat was sorry and bought the baker a new calendar. Thus, the two became great friends and made many loaves together. (Teacher records, 2010, p.4).

This is not a case of copying and reproducing words, but the children create texts from keywords, using canonical or not canonical stories, or their own experience. The characters of the animal world are humanized and compose scripts where the focus is creativity and the production of stories that are always meaningful acts[25], in imaginary worlds[26], which provide a basis for expanding literacy experimentation.

An example of use of a cultural artifact is the calendar, as Gustavo comments: "Teacher, we were two days at home" (Teacher records, 2010, p.2), anticipating the teacher's speech to guide the marking of Saturday and Sunday in the calendar. Another child celebrates the approach of the day to play in the toy library: "There is only one day left for going to LABRIMP" (Teacher records, 2010, p.4).

The marking of calendar functions as a sign (visual image) is an external support that helps in reflection. The location of the child's birthday helps to understand the notion of time and the score in matches, the counting.

For mathematical literacy the teacher makes use of the chicken game, organizing a card with drawings for playing in pairs, where the number of eggs that "their" chicken lays - established by random drawings - is recorded in numbers. To many children the recording was an obstacle, however in the relationship with their partners or with other pairs they overcame their difficulties, which points out the important role of mediation among children, the subjects of the action[8]. Another form of mediation can be seen in two children who resorted to the poster in the room, which contains numbers from 0 to 100, to find out how to write number 17. They recited the numbers (a mnemonic aid) and found the number's writing by looking at the poster. Other pairs who were watching used the same strategy. Noted, in this case, is the mediation of the object (the card for the game in pairs), the signs (the table of numbers in the room and the mnemonic marking) and the children, the three types of mediations that integrate: subject, object and sign[8].

In another example, children separate the amount of toothpicks in a bag according to a number randomly selected by the teacher. Some could not cope with separating toothpicks inside and outside the bag. Others left the

toothpicks piled up, lined up or grouped according to the numbers drawn in the game. Most children did not separate the correct amount of toothpicks, even after the demonstration made by the teacher. One child explains the reason for this failure: - "They must have gotten distracted and grabbed more toothpicks" (Teacher records, 2010, p.20). In this observation the child emphasizes the role of attention and awareness in the success of the activity. The child successful in this action uses the toothpicks as external signs and mobilizes mental functions in an integrated way, using attention, memory, perception and motor action to separate the correct amount of toothpicks[8]. The teacher's demonstration in separating the toothpicks is not sufficient for learning, which requires the agency of children, the awareness of the internal reasons that mobilize the pursuit of goals and objectives for guiding their actions[8,17,24].

During a play that requires recording the points of three players in the same table, the children were asked how they found the winner. Some children had difficulties, while others produced mathematical sentences to explain the mental processes used to define the winner. Among the signs created by children are "conventional" signs ($3 + 5 + 2 = 10$); personal marks ($3 - 5 - 2$ is 10) and sentences (3 plus 5 is 8 plus 2 is 10) (Teacher records, 2010, p. 6).

It is not possible to play games without the organization of collections, materials and furniture in sufficient quantity and quality to meet the needs of the classes. Trapezoidal tables make the reorganization of work in small or large groups possible, and chairs at a height suitable for small children avoid making them tired, with their legs dangling, or being forced to kneel for better visibility of what occurs in the room. The proper environment[27] for quality education includes furniture and materials, items mentioned in official documents, but non-existent in the reality of most schools. In the case of Application School, in addition to furniture, games were purchased for the school, parents made donations, games researched by the teachers were constructed by the educational support technician, and the acquisition of educational games for reading and writing (a project of the collaborating university researcher.) Participation in group studies, which include FEUSP practice professionals, allows the discussion of educational practices with play and games, an additional important condition offered to the first grade teacher, which is non-existent in the reality of public schools.

6. Evaluation of the Practices by Children, Parents and Teachers

The evaluation of children, parents and teachers in the period of 2006 to 2010 was used to understand the relevance of play and games in the literacy of children.

According to the teacher, in 2006, with only one class of 30 children and two adults, half of them mastered the written code as early as mid-term. This ratio was not maintained in 2007, 2008 and 2009, with the creation of another class,

because the only supporting technician had to split his work into two classes. To the teacher this factor and the specificities of each group could be the causes of score variations in subsequent years. (Interview, 2010)

Despite these differences there was progress, according to testimonies of 2nd to 5th grade teachers who accompanied the children in other years: "The games help the mathematical reasoning and language", "children are happier, they talk more, learn and are more expressive and critical", "they are already accustomed to school routine", "they come to the 2nd grade with greater autonomy", "those who were not literate, when they arrived at 2nd grade they had a large amount of knowledge acquired in the 1st grade that enabled rapid advances in their reading and writing hypotheses", "The six-year-olds had a different proposal from those who began at age seven. The playfulness is much greater, considering the requirements of their age" (Teachers of 2nd to 5th Grades, 2010).

The hearing reveals the positive view that children have of school[10]: "Because it had a lot of cool things and it also had clay, Lego, lots of cool stuff", "It was cool when we had activities", "I found it cool because we played a lot" (Children, 2007)

The mother, who thought playing "was exaggerated" believed her son would learn nothing, acknowledged that "the games contributed to learning" (Mother #1, 2007). To another, the project encourages the desire to read, write, and count using "games, word search, pastimes" (Mother #2, 2007). Another mother said that since the first year her daughter, who was shy, began to read the "home for sale" sign, showing that literacy is a social practice of reading the world. (Mother #3, 2007)

A mother remembers the meeting at which she was told not to expect copying and dictation activities for child literacy. She was anxious, but suddenly her son began to "read signs, billboards, like comics - I think the library also helped, the work with *sudoku*, and when I realized it, he was already reading ..." And concludes:

My idea of 1st grade was a lot of dictation, a lot of copying, a lot of adding and subtracting, and it was not like that, it was easy, it exceeded my expectations because at the beginning of the year I thought he would not learn to read and write. (Mother #4, 2007)

The integrated forms of knowledge acquisition are highlighted. The importance of the vegetable patch, the park and of other activities appears in the depositions, "she begins to tell you something more scientific, some information", while she says "how much fun, how much she shared with friends[...] regarding the classroom activities she mentions "Oh, I learned something ... they taught me a song "(Mother #1, 2010). Another mother mentioned the importance of the park, such as: "the part he likes best", stressing that "there he is [...] more free [...] he is learning [...] reports that the park's blackberries "do not grow all year long" and how one can discuss "several contents from a simple question" (Mother #2, 2010).

The child's autonomy is emphasized: "She now reads all by herself before going to sleep [...], she went in with a nursery school, a baby's, mind, and now she is autonomous, she does everything by herself" (Mother #3, 2010.) She also mentioned the success of literacy: "by mid-term she began to have initiative to do homework, to do the project, the research [...] turn on the computer. [...] She is already fluent in reading, I used to read to her before going to sleep, now she reads by herself" (Mother #3, 2010).

Even for the child that is "literate" enough, there is a difference in quality, because it allows a smooth transition of these children to elementary school. This fact was mentioned in the testimony of a mother who has two children at the Application School. The eldest entered at age seven before the implementation of the nine-year basic education, and her daughter attended the first year at age six.

[...] my other son was literate when he entered and had a shock, because there they had a method and here there was another, so it was hard. With her it was not the case, she did not go through the trauma he did [...] she learned more in that first year than he did in preschool. He did copies, used Smooth Path with syllabic families, she did not have this, but I found that she learned more consistently than he did (Mother #4, 2008).

Asked about the adaptation of a child coming from nursery school, a mother said:

I expected him to have problems, as the beginning at nursery school was difficult. On the contrary, he asks me every day to not be late. I think they are still very young and this time to play he already had in nursery school and which EA now provides is extremely rich (Mother #2, 2008).

The appreciation of the child's right to play is fundamental to the teacher accompanying the children on visits to the Toy Library. She mentions that the play space ensures "the right of children to be children, creating bonds of friendship, with freedom to play [...], she likes the area and clears up the room with pleasure" (LA BRIMP report, 2009, p. 2). A mother

points out: "If all schools could have this space, it would surely facilitate respect for others, for the used space [...] and leave it organized after playing a lot, and increasingly developing their potential" (LA BRIMP report, 2006, p. 1).

The problem of the large number of children and only one teacher to meet the needs of each child, especially of the more timid ones, is pointed out by parents and children. According to a father: "The only thing she complained about is that [...] when she raised her hand, at times you were not able to respond [...]. At her previous school, which was tiny, the teacher would go there, to the four to five students" (Father #6, 2010). Another mother is keen to mention that, to expand literacy "more professionals are needed, as the number of children is very large, and a permanent helper would bring great benefit" (Mother #2, 2008).

Despite the difficulty to meet all children's needs in a more individualized manner, evaluating the acquisition of writing ability shows the successful entry of children into the world of letters. The monitoring of children's performance was conducted by the teacher, based on the categories of the stages of writing from research on the psychogenesis of writing by Ferreiro and Teberosky [23], a common practice among teachers.

The discussion of the concept of mediation shows that this manner of diagnosing children's literacy by the classification in stages is insufficient because, as mentioned by Vygotsky [8], it requires understanding of mediation processes by means of signs and cultural artifacts, as demonstrated in episodes described throughout this paper. For the purpose of showing quantitative aspects, the data collected by the teacher was used and is summarized in Table 1, which seeks to highlight the success of most children already in the first grade, in reading and writing, in the end of the year, in the alphabetic level (2006 = 56,66% and 2010 = 68,97%), and in the syllabic-alphabetic level (2006 = 26,66%; 2007 = 46,66%; 2009 = 48,38% and 2010 = 31,03%).

Table 1. Monitoring of the Writing Process of Six-year-old Children – 2006 -2010

Writing levels	Number of Children = 120							
	2006 30 children		2007 30 children		2009 31 children		2010 29 children	
	March	October	March	December	March	December	February	November
Pre-syllabic	8 24%	0 0%	10 33,33%	1 3,33%	11 35,48%	1 3,22%	17 58,62%	0 0%
Syllabic	15 50%	4 13,33%	8 26,66%	2 6,66%	11 35,48%	3 9,67%	4 13,79%	0 0%
Syllabic-Alphabetic	3 10%	8 26,66%	5 16,66%	14 46,66%	4 12,90%	15 48,38%	5 17,24%	9 31,03%
Alphabetic	4 13,33%	17 56,66%	7 23,33%	13 43,33%	5 16,12%	11 35,48%	3 10,34%	20 68,97%

Source: teacher evaluation forms: 2006 to 2010.

Note: 2008 data was not found

7. Closing Remarks

We observed in these research that the curricular organization that integrates several languages, the adult support that is compatible with the manner of learning of children aged six, especially by play and games differs from the current model of fragmented disciplinary fields of knowledge, and moves away from the stance of "exclusivity for literacy", criticized in the federal law text[5] p.10, which guides the nine-year basic education implementation process.

The class's request for a teacher specializing in early childhood education and with an awareness of the importance of a smooth transition from preschool to first grade of elementary school, and the adoption of games for the development of literacy, was essential to the proposal's success.

The availability and adequacy of teaching resources are essential curricular conditions flagged by the legislation. When tradition endorses the use of games in the practice of demonstration by the teacher, the creation of awareness, which occurs only when the operation is done by a child - who creates the internal reasons that lead to the postulation of goals and objectives to address problems - becomes unfeasible. Material restriction also generates led and exhibited practices, with little room for children's free and investigative actions.

In the case of the 1st grade, the production of materials, game cards for each child, with the help of employees and teachers, and the purchase/donation of games by the school and parents ensured their variety and quality. These conditions enabled individual and collective activities, free and directed recreation, configuring an unusual situation in public schools, which suffer the effects of the precarious working conditions of the professionals and the lack of parental involvement, due to the culture of individualism, a result of the absence of collaborative practices to connect to the wider environment[28].

Another essential factor for an educational project that includes play[5] is the theoretical and practical knowledge of the impact of games in learning, which involves continuous professional training. Public school teachers mentioned the difficulty of training in games. The little knowledge shared by teachers who "get on their own," prevents quality practice, showing problems in continued education in public schools [29].

The research provides clues about the need for a more individualized mediation in game situations. Classrooms with 30 children and one adult do not represent a favorable environment to fulfill the demand for individualized attention and mediation, as mentioned by their users. In opposition to the verbalist tradition, the use of games requires the agency of the child, the availability of time, space, materials and partners so that mental functions are mobilized for solving problems.

A full-period school, with smaller groups or more professionals, could add quality to the job, as is common in countries with better human development indices.

It is not only for ensuring six-year-old children the right to play, but for meeting the assumptions of the legislation that emphasize "the development of the various expressions and learning the knowledge areas established by the National Curriculum Guidelines for Elementary Education." This task requires clarity of purpose, collaborative work, prepared teachers, materials for each student, many play and games in all fields of knowledge and a curricular plan that incorporate all of these, a challenge that remains to be faced in most public schools.

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¹ The basic education period of nine years corresponds to the regular basic education phase aimed at the 6-14 years old age group. This is the new configuration of this level of education established by the Brazilian legislation in 2004, bringing the elementary school entry age for children down to six years old. Under the previous Brazilian law, the elementary school had a duration of 8 years and was directed to the 7-14 years old age group. Children aged 6 were enrolled in preschool.