

INTERACT OR INTERFERE? INTERACTIONS BETWEEN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR AND CHILDREN

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Abstract

Children are more subordinate to adult time than ever before. Safeguarding children's rights means more than intervening, taking their needs and interests into account. It means that children can influence space and materials that surround them. Underpinned by a qualitative, phenomenological-interpretative methodology, this study is based on an educational intention based on the principle of creating learning opportunities and on theoretical references that advocate valuing an intervention in early childhood education that respects the child as a considered person, capable of making decisions, expressing opinions and taking concrete and consequent action on their learning. We have thus defined the general objective that guides the fieldwork: to create a framework of strategies for developing dynamics outdoors, building an outdoor room with the children. Data collection is supported by direct observation (through written, video, image and audio records) and indirect observation through the application of an interview with the aim of collecting the children's narratives about their play and the possibility of transferring the normal activity room to the outdoors. Data shows that the adult's choices radically interfere with the way children behave and interact with others. Strategies applied and improved by the educators are the result of the constant reflection on practice that characterises this work. It also reflects on children's behaviour in relation to one of the great dilemmas of educational practice in early childhood education: to interact or to interfere?

Keywords: Adult role, early childhood education, intervention, children's agency.

1 INTRODUCTION

The idea that nothing else matters but knowing how to stop (Fisher, 2016) brings us back to the importance of distance and silence. Knowing how to observe is as important as knowing when to intervene. Interactions are fundamental in the educational relationship, but the educator is often pressured by various factors:

- Parents and guardians value the fact that children are preparing for the upcoming school term;
- Institutional educational projects that, in practice, value success and aim to prepare children for primary school, often based on achieving goals through activities based on the apprehension of knowledge;
- Labour issues such as the adult's timetable and their own "agenda" (Fisher, 2016);
- The training of early childhood educators, which in many contexts moulds future professionals to build an educational model that is more production-orientated and less process-orientated.

The "subordination of children's time to that of adults and institutions" (OPC, p.19) starts early in children's lives and this concern, although discussed and conscious, doesn't seem to be having an effect on adult intervention and institutional perspectives. It is necessary to "recognise and respect the rhythm of each child and guarantee the time they need to be involved in the processes..." (OPC, p.19).

Positivity, happiness and the need to feel well-being associated with the intervention leads us to reflect on Csikszentmihalyi's (2023) concept of "Flow" and how meaningful experiences can happen in the most unexpected situations. Observing and allowing time for children to start building this process of flow is essential. The question arises as to when the adult can intervene to enhance the flow or interfere in the child's creative dynamic and in-depth experience. The choices we make in our practice may, in

addition to other factors, be related to the adult's sense of relaxation. Certain aspects have an effective impact on the intervention and on the way we balance between an intervention that enhances and one that blocks involvement. Educators can feel more relaxed and open when their intervention is not supported by an adult's agenda. They can also encourage more interaction between children when they don't feel compelled to speak (Fisher, 2016).

The increasingly recurrent debate on the creation of learning opportunities provided by the adult reflects a change in the way we look at planning (Conrado & Pinheiro, 2023). Underpinned by a need to achieve success, planning intervention still presupposes, in many contexts, an activity by the adult who defines the learning and goals to be achieved by the children (Woods, 2017). The predominant voice is also often that of the adult who determines spaces and resources, rules and activities. In contrast, it is now crucial to encourage adults to build contexts and facilitate learning by providing the "means and contexts to allow children to appropriate them according to their vocations, tendencies and talents" (Neto, 2020, p. 129). Creating learning environments involves looking at the space and providing access to open and flexible resources, following children's interests and allowing for long periods of free play (Woods, 2017).

It should be noted that there are resources that serve only one use or have limited uses and are therefore closed. This gives children fragile experiences with little scope for thought, reflection and creativity. They also offer few opportunities for interaction between children.

2 METHODOLOGY

Supported by a qualitative methodology, of the phenomenological-interpretative type (Amado, 2013), this study is based on the principle of creating learning opportunities and on theoretical references that advocate valuing an intervention in early childhood education that respects the child as a considered person, capable of making decisions, expressing opinions and taking concrete and consequent action on their learning. Starting from the understanding and interpretation of reality, this work uses observation as the main data collection strategy along the same methodological path that we have been following in OFEI's wider project, "Outdoor learning opportunities: changing practices in urban kindergartens and daycare centres" (Silva & Pinheiro, 2023; Silva & Pinheiro, 2024).

We opted for direct observation because it is "one in which the researcher proceeds directly to collect information without addressing the subjects concerned" (Quiwy, 1998, p.164). In this process, we recorded events or evidence at the time, but also through video recording, to later extract the written observation records. The group of children involved is between 4 and 5 years old. It consists of 16 children, four of whom are 4 years old (3 girls and 1 boy) and the remaining eleven 5 years old (4 girls and 7 boys). The institution is part of the RAM Public Schools (Autonomous Region of Madeira, Portugal), in the municipality of Santana. In this study, we are looking for "what actually makes sense and how it makes sense to the subjects being investigated", "we are looking for phenomena as they are perceived and manifested through language" (Amado, 2013. P.41) linked to orality, facial expression or even behaviour and interactions.

3 RESULTS

The data analysis is the result of a reflection on planning and intervention, as well as the activities that emerged. Starting from the data collection and in permanent interaction with the theoretical foundations, we defined several dimensions of analysis that deserved specific attention. We therefore turned our attention to aspects such as: the adult in the intervention: to intervene or to interfere?; leadership in learning: diversity and the creation of opportunities; interactions between children; and make-believe and reality. In this article we focus our reflection on the issues of intervention and interference in children's lives and activities.

Throughout the intervention period, the adult's role was always considered, trying to make intervention choices that oscillated between silence and action. The decision on whether to remain an observer and/or an intervening element depended on the contexts that were being experienced. Professional experience and pedagogical intuition were decisive, supporting the choice of the best moment to intervene or interfere in the learning opportunities created.

In observation record (RO) 17 (figure 1), during the child's free play, the decision to intervene seemed to be associated with the teacher's intuitiveness.



Figure 1: Children playing in the outdoor kitchen

"Children are playing on the kitchen worktop outside. They find a set of plates on the floor. The teacher says: "Look, the plates are on the floor over there!" The child goes and gets them" (RO17).

During this project we tried to learn more about indicators for contextualised intervention, understanding how we could guide our action more assertively. We wanted our intervention to be useful and meaningful. We therefore chose to keep a low profile. In RO17 we realised that it was important to intervene when we noticed that all the plates in the make-believe house were on the floor. This perception is related to the association between make-believe and reality, because at home we don't leave the plates on the floor, but also because of the importance that, as educators, we attach to a certain order and organisation.



Figure 2 Children building houses

The idea of when we intervene or interfere during this work was a constant concern, so there was an immediate analysis of our intervention as adults. In RO2 (figure 2) we can clearly see that at times children seem to feel that we interfere when we question them. In this particular record, the way the child responded reflects this idea. It should be in the adult's interest to be attentive to the children's signals and the adult's decision is. It often takes a lot of observation, experience and ongoing reflection.

"Educator: *What are you doing?* Child: *A house!*

Educator: *And what's that?* [points to corks].

Child: *You don't know, I told you, it's the guards*" (RO2).

The moments of make-believe play are particularly challenging contexts (figure 3), but also spaces for consistent educational intervention. In RO19 "two children bring food to the teacher and the teacher says: *Oh, what good food! What about the cutlery?* The teacher was responding to an action taken by the children when they brought her food. She had to intervene in the child's play by pointing out that cutlery was needed. We consider this to be an intervention that adds to and makes play more demanding and not so much an interference.



Figure 3: Children playing make-believe.



Figure 4: Child discovers and plays in a vertical water course

Valuing emergent activities was also one of our practices. This strategy is greatly enhanced by the availability of space, resources and time, the latter being associated with the freedom we give children to discover on their own or with their peers. Figure 4 in RO28 is an example of this. A child discovered a fissure in the wall that created a vertical path of water. He observed it and realised that if he stopped it, he could collect water in a bowl. The adult realised that the child was attentively collecting rainwater (figure 4). In a context like this, it can be interesting for the adult to limit their presence to observation, as the child is autonomously managing their play, discovering and learning physics and/or engineering concepts, creating actions and making decisions. In this case, the educator chose not to interfere. In reality, the child needed concentration and even a sense of balance to point the round container to the exact place where the water was flowing. If the adult chose to intervene, it could cause a pause in the progress of the child's activity.

In the context of interactions between the children, the level of autonomy they display is striking. We know that this is a group of 5-year-olds, with an oral capacity that is already well-established. They are capable of expressing opinions and sharing suggestions, but this is not the only determining factor for the child's agency to be promoted naturally. Other competences are essential and relate, for example, to issues of leadership, security, a sense of freedom and belonging.



Figure 5. Children shopping



Figure 6: Children racing with bobbins

When we analyse interactions between the children, it's clear to see the level of autonomy they display, as we see in RO5 where we describe the creation of rules in the make-believe game. Children assign roles, they know the reality well: they observe and know that they have to choose the product before buying, they ask the shop "clerk" and pay with an ATM: "Child 1: *What ATM?*"; "Child 2: *Do you want these? [corks]*" (RO5). In this case, the adult chose not to interfere, remaining distant and letting the children freely construct the story they were experiencing.

In another context, outside, "three children run a race with bobbins (figure 6) creating rules on their own. One child gets up from the bobbin and starts walking to go faster. A second child says: "You can't do it (...). That's no good" (RO22). In this record, we realise that the children can create a game without instructions from the adult. The need to create rules arises from the collective nature of the game, which involved the participation of several children. The rules were thus verbalised, shared and considered by members, and there were even reminders to colleagues who didn't comply. As we saw in the observation records, children are able to look beyond the function for which an object was created. When resources are made available, they take on a parallel life and various alternative functions without adult interference.

4 CONCLUSIONS

More and more people are talking about the role of the educator as a guide in the child's learning and development process. We know that it is important for them to reflect on their actions, considering children needs and interests.

About the dimension concerning "**the adult in the intervention: intervening or interfering?**" we can assume that this intervention was characterised by constant observation on the part of the adult and that he only interfered when he considered it pertinent for the children, without having an excessive influence on the children's play. It was also noted that on certain occasions children included the adult in their games as a way of completing them, thus giving the adult an intervention role.

Often when the adult doesn't intervene, he allows the child to develop various and diverse skills, thus promoting their confidence and autonomy. This attitude shows that the adult's observation was attentive and respectful, allowing the child to play independently, as well as offering them support and/or guidance when they ask for it. It also allows the child to face challenges created by the activity, developing problem-solving skills, as well as the ability to make decisions and choices.

Throughout the research we realised that pedagogical practice must balance between adult intervention and children's autonomy and creativity. As adults play a fundamental and crucial role in children's harmonious development, they need to take on a guiding role to support and enrich play without over-intervening. In addition, maximising play and/or emergent activities is fundamental to provide an active learning environment for the child.

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