

DEMOLISHING WALLS: A MUD EXPERIENCE WITH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

There is an increasing need for children to play outdoors and to explore and know the limits of their bodies, and there is evidence of an emergency to recover the outdoors (Author1 & Author2, 2023a), since children currently tend to remain in conditioned and controlled spaces. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has revived reflection on the importance of access to the outdoors. The idea seems to be accepted that it is necessary to "return to nature, live more slowly and learn to be more aware of the body and silence, and at the same time experience the seduction of new technologies" (Neto, 2020, p.20). In the first three years of children's lives, they use their bodies to mediate learning. They explore the world around them - they are active learners. It is from all their actions and senses that children gather information for their discovery of the world, because "through the coordination of taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing, feelings and actions, they are able to construct knowledge" (Post & Hohmann, 2011, p.23).

This project, supported by a qualitative methodology, aims to understand and implement practices to reduce the constraints on access to the outdoors for a group of children in daycare. The diagnostic reflection carried out initially made it possible to understand the existing reality. The evidence supported the implementation of new intervention strategies accompanied by constant monitoring. Observation therefore became the data collection tool par excellence. In the final phase of the project, families were interviewed, coinciding with the usual end-of-year meeting with parents, to gauge their perspectives on the intervention and their participation. Eight families from the group of children in this study were interviewed. The aim was to create an open and flexible script to allow the interviewees to express themselves more freely about the work carried out. To shape this instrument, the following dimensions of analysis were defined: experiences/opportunities created for the children; children's learning; hygiene and clothing management issues; the most valued aspects of the project; and proposals for improvement. Researchers' initial concern about parents' acceptance of the dirty clothes the children brought home was overcome by the evidence the parents encountered. Children's behaviours of well-being and joy were evident. The fact that the whole project was developed in partnership with the parents helped to prevent any possible constraints. Parents knew what was going on in the classroom and were asked to participate by enriching the mud kitchen and bringing in materials.

Keywords: childhood education, children's agency, childcare, outdoor, parents.

1 INTRODUCTION

Adults remember the games of their childhood. There were fewer toys made and sold. Life was slower and distances longer. They resorted to less structured materials that stimulated creativity and imagination, inventing and building games with objects around them. We also remember the freedom and safety of playing in the street, close to home, without constant adult supervision. Today, the presence of children in more urbanised contexts seems to be largely reduced to gardens and parks, spaces built and defined by adults without the participation of children (Vidal, Dias & Seixas, 2023). Cities are often represented as spaces "for building networks, social exchanges, social progress and life opportunities." However, there is also another view that refers to "the city as hyper-consumption, social inequalities, bad customs, violence and criminal chaos" (Barbosa, Ferro & Lopes, 2023, p.19). Gardens and urban parks, environments built by adults, are often a chance for children to spend time outdoors as a family. But "children continue to be largely absent from studies on public policies, particularly issues related to mobility, urban regeneration and housing (Seixas, 2023, p.69).

Neto (2020) emphasises the idea that today's adults were freer as children and that today's children, before the pandemic, would have been locked up within four walls a long time ago. Today, children and young people interact in a different way, using more and more technological resources. It is necessary to "re-create the time and space to play in the street, in the neighbourhood, at school and in the city, but also at home, and democratise play without formatting or a schedule to follow" (Neto, 2020, p.22). "Children (...) have been seen from the perspective of their dependence on adults: they lack the means to develop and defend themselves and therefore need to be educated and protected by those in power, i.e. adults" (Barbosa, Ferro & Lopes, 2023, p.19). This perspective can create "very unequal play opportunities, either because of the lack of play equipment in their community, or because they are constantly busy with scheduled activities, or because they don't have their family's permission to play 'outside'" (Barbosa, Ferro & Lopes, 2023, p.26). The way children play today can be conditioned by an adult's care perspective, preventing them from playing freely and moving autonomously in nature, from sensorially exploring natural elements, as well as playing in outdoor spaces and environments. We know that play plays a fundamental and crucial role in children's global and integral development, as they learn best through autonomous play, and their lives are enriched by the fact that it is a pleasurable, imaginative, spontaneous and creative activity. Furthermore, it is through play that children understand the world around them and "interact and explore spaces, objects and materials" (Silva et al., 2016, p.85).

In the first three years of children's lives, they use their bodies to mediate learning. They explore the world around them - they are active learners. It is from all their actions and senses that children gather information for their discovery of the world, because "through the coordination of taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing, feelings and actions, they are able to construct knowledge" (Post & Hohmann, 2011, p.23). Contact with the outdoors from an early age and proximity to nature provide children with an ideal environment for developing their sensory systems. In addition, playing outdoors allows children to develop motor and sensory maps that lead to efficient spatial perception. As Neto says, "by being in contact with nature, we can develop our sensory and perceptive human 'machine' through visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory stimulation, etc." (Neto, 2020, p. 153).

Institutions and family contexts in urban areas offer challenges that are often difficult to solve. The lack of contact with nature, the isolation of the soil, the small number of bushes and trees make it difficult for children to have different opportunities to get to know the most basic aspects of life. Mud kitchens are a valued resource in educational contexts and offer something different from dirt areas for digging. A mud kitchen includes elements of the interior area of a house, which allows children to use and recreate space and objects, giving them multiple meanings in dramatic play activities, imaginary situations and the recreation of everyday experiences, individually and with others. It also allows them to invent and represent characters and situations, on their own initiative and/or based on different proposals, diversifying the ways in which they are realised. Mud kitchens encourage children to take part in a range of experiences. Children are very interested and naturally born explorers of things in nature, how things happen and work, and are intuitively curious.

Opportunities created allow children to play a variety of games, such as "discovering and determining the limits of their body" (Andrade, 2014, p.17), as well as being able to manipulate and recognise the characteristics of objects. This activity is relevant to the development of language and speech, as it helps children with their orality, since they have to "express in words everything that is going on in their minds during play" (Andrade, 2014, p.17). When playing, children learn to know, learn to do, learn to live together and learn to be. They learn in action and not as mere spectators. They also get to know and observe the world around them, becoming curious and questioning. To experience directly is to live, learn and know from the body. Furthermore, it should be noted that it is through autonomous play that children learn best, as "children's lives are enriched by play, which is pleasurable, self-motivated, imaginative, spontaneous, creative and free of adult-imposed goals or outcomes" (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2020, p. 7). It also promotes memory and helps children learn to solve problems. Thus, we emphasise that play promotes a child's "physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (...) because already acquired skills and abilities are used to control, exercise new skills and use them creatively" (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2020, p. 9). It is therefore important to emphasise and reinforce that it is urgent for children to have time to play actively and freely with nature, to develop motor skills, autonomy, but above all to learn how to grow healthily and create memories.

We also consider the interaction between family and daycare centres to be an opportunity, as it is fundamental for the harmonious and integral development of children. This relationship should be built from the first moment parents visit daycare centres, creating a basis of trust and mutual collaboration (Vidal & Pires, 2022). Collaboration between them provides multiple benefits. Children feel safer and more confident when they realise that there is continuity between the two environments. In addition, the

exchange of information between educators and parents allows for more effective monitoring of the child's development, adjusting pedagogical strategies as necessary. There are various strategies for promoting a good relationship between nursery and family. These include: Regular meetings, Daily Communication or Continuous Feedback Encouraging parents to give feedback on the nursery's practices and to suggest improvements.

Despite the benefits, the interaction between family and daycare centres can face challenges, such as parents' lack of time or differences in educational approaches. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential that the daycare centre adopts a flexible and understanding attitude, offering different channels of communication and adapting to the specific needs of each family.

2 METHODOLOGY

The project, supported by an essentially qualitative methodology, aims to understand and implement practices that will reduce the constraints on access to the outdoors for a group of children in daycare. The research proposal thus arises from a praxeological understanding in the context of a group of 1-year-olds, having followed their journey up to the age of 2 in a daycare centre in Porto, Portugal. The diagnostic carried out initially made it possible to understand the existing reality. The evidence supported the implementation of new intervention strategies accompanied by constant monitoring. Observation therefore became the data collection tool par excellence.

To systematise, the study was carried out in three phases. At first, great importance was attached to understanding the existing reality with a view to defining more contextualised practices in the next phase. Data was collected from the children's families through a questionnaire survey for parents, as well as through observation records of the children in the classroom, in terms of space and materials, classroom routines, opportunities for children to go outside and the children's behaviour. In this phase, which we can call diagnostic, we collected a set of observation records that allowed us to build a description/reflection on the classroom context, relating children and space. Data from this period has already been published (Silva & Pinheiro, 2023a).

The second phase was mainly geared towards intervention and the implementation of dynamics to create opportunities and contact with natural objects. At this stage, observation records were used as the main data collection tool with the aim of assessing the intervention and enabling implementation of new action strategies. This study used 46 written observation records and 188 photographic records. Records focused on: teacher's intentionality; management of space and materials; use of natural elements; behaviour and relationships between children; child-centred learning; relationships between children and playing with others; autonomy and problem-solving. The observation records (written and photographic) made it possible to systematise information to determine, both in the first phase and in the second, the guidelines for action.

In the final phase of the project, an interview was carried out with the families, coinciding with the usual end-of-year meeting with parents, to gauge their perspectives on the intervention carried out. Eight families from the group of children in this study were interviewed. The aim was to create an open and flexible script to allow the interviewees to express themselves more freely about the work carried out. For the construction of this instrument, the following dimensions of analysis were defined: experiences/opportunities created for children; children's learning; hygiene and clothing management issues; aspects most valued in the project; proposals for improvement. The choice to use several data collection instruments stems from the importance of triangulation in order to build a more consistent methodological design, since "the main interest of the interpretive researcher is the possibility of particularising rather than generalising (...)" (Amado, 2013, p.44).

Ethical concerns were always present throughout the study. As the work was carried out with children, a series of procedures were taken into account: the anonymity of children, interviewees and respondents; authorisations from the daycare centre, parents and children; consideration of the children's opinions; the benefit of the study for the children; the children's well-being; and permanent reflection on the different phases of the study (UNICEF 2019; ERIC 2024). For greater clarity in reading, while protecting anonymity, we note that the reference to children is coded with letters and the reference to the parents interviewed is coded with a letter and number (E1, E2...).

3 RESULTS

We used the surprise effect as a strategy for integrating the mud kitchen into an outside corridor adjacent to the living room. The day the equipment appeared was particularly important and moved the whole group in the direction of the space determined for its installation. Several children began to show an interest in the area, as we can see from the observation records: "Most of the children, whenever they moved to the edge of the window, showed great desire and interest in going outside" (RO2).

As we've already mentioned, the educator's role was supported in the early stages by respect for the child's autonomous action and decision, based on little intervention but a lot of observation, dialogue with the children and challenges for the children to describe what they were doing. These strategies allowed us to find other needs, particularly in terms of materials. It was from this context that, over time, children and parents were mobilised to enrich the area with pots, pans, plates, soil, leaves, sticks, spoons, fabrics, among others.

Initially, a meeting was held with parents to let them know about the project we were developing with the children and to ask for their input and participation. From that moment on, parents showed great pleasure, curiosity, interest and enthusiasm for the project and for helping to improve the mud kitchen. In addition, this dynamic favoured communication as well as the school-family relationship.

This context was highlighted by parents, who mentioned the relationship that was established between classroom activities and families as a valued aspect of the project. Specifically, they noted: "Family integration; asking for things for the mud kitchen." "L herself used to say "this is what we need, that's what we need" - that's all it takes to make an exchange." (E1); "Parents' participation in the project and the participation of the other association" (E3); "at the level of parent-family exchanges, etc. (...) they bring these experiences home" (E1). So children made a list of the materials and objects they needed for the mud kitchen and parents brought what they had to complete it and give the children new games to play.

When it came to organising materials and objects in the mud kitchen, children arranged them in their own way, i.e. the pots and pans were placed inside the oven and also underneath the kitchen. As for the natural materials, the team kept them in a transparent box next to the kitchen, so that they would be visible to the children and at the same time within reach for them to handle and manipulate.

Next to the mud kitchen, a table had to be created, using three tyres and a pallet, as a way for the children to "eat at the table". It was also a way for the children to organise their games even better, as the material became an extension of the mud kitchen.

The interaction with families provided an unexpected result, related to parents' reflections on the role of the educator and the importance of nursery and kindergarten classrooms in children's lives. In the interviews, parents noted, "Normally there isn't much of a connection. The fact that children know what they're going to do and what experience they're going to have is important. Often professionals pour out activities and don't explain to children what's going to happen. L herself explained what she was going to do, what she needed..." (E1); "I compare it to my daughter, the whole winter is inside the classroom. It's many months, many hours in the room. It's not easy for us (adults), we need to go out, go to the toilet, have a coffee and they don't have that" (E2); "not working at the tables all the time; it makes me feel like children are always doing table work" (E2); "It's play that's closer to nature, the freedom of not always looking dirty and everything always being disinfected and clean. We don't always have to worry about the child being clean. This is a replica of how things should be. Everything isn't contaminated! There's an intrinsic need that children have: to manipulate, to fill, to empty..." (E8)

By creating opportunities for the children, they very naturally verbalised their needs and interests in their play, as we can see in RO28: "T., B. and M. (adults in the room) need green leaves for cooking" (MT). When G played the symbolic game and pretended the mud was food, he put it in his mouth and said it was good (RO35); D put the pots and cutlery in the basin and said: "I'm going to wash the dishes like this, but the foam is missing" (referring to the detergent) (RO36). Parents note similar evidence when they say: "Try saying it at home. She has a play kitchen at home and often said that she had lots of pots and pans (...) that she made lots of cakes, lots of food, lots of soup" (E1); "I also often asked her what she did; she invented everything: 'I make soup, I make cakes, I make fish'" (E1).

Many materials were used to play make-believe. Sticks were spoons, leaves and stones were food that produced real menus in pots. But sometimes they were also swords. With the elements of nature, D and F play warriors with swords. D makes a point of imitating the sound of swords hitting each other "bang, bang" (RO24).

The opportunity created for children to be the driving force behind their own play, action and decision-making was also enhanced by the educator's role with families. It was important to pass on to families the idea that for children to be able to experience truly meaningful contexts, they would have to get dirty and that getting dirty was a very important part of their experiences and lives.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the first three years of life, children learn by using their bodies to explore the world around them and are therefore referred to as active learners. Children explore the world through actions such as: observing, listening, touching, reaching, grasping, mouthing, releasing, moving their bodies, smelling, tasting or making things happen by manipulating objects. The data presented in this document reflects the intervention phase of a wider project and has made it possible to record intervention indicators.

We realised in the diagnostic period (Silva & Pinheiro, 2023a) that, according to parents, "Learning" seems to be associated with more formal spaces such as classroom areas with tables and chairs and less with contexts in which children play in the mud or in the rain. On the other hand, the latter contexts are always associated with "Fun" and "Well-being". This aspect is particularly important for early childhood education professionals in order to promote the idea that learning often takes place in a more meaningful way when informal contexts are favoured. Realising that the diagnostic data collection with parents covered the whole of the daycare centre (three classrooms), in the interviews with parents at the end of the intervention period, the perspective on learning in these "more informal" contexts, such as the mud kitchen, is very evident. We therefore believe that the project has not only brought children new opportunities for development and learning, but also some change in parents' perceptions of early childhood education settings. Here's an example of the recovery of knowledge from parents: "My mum always told me that if I was dirtier, it was because I had played freely. It was something my mum always told me..." (E8).

We should also emphasise the importance attributed to access to the outdoors as a driver of balance in the use of technology, an aspect that was partially evidenced in the attribution of the characteristic "Danger" by some respondents during the diagnostic period (Silva & Pinheiro, 2023b). In the intervention phase of the project on which this article focuses, we noticed changes between parents' and children's generation in terms of access to the outdoors. Outdoor spaces have changed and so have access opportunities. Parents, as children, used more informal and natural outdoor contexts, such as backyards or the street, while their own children used more formatted outdoor spaces, such as gardens, urban parks, etc. (Silva & Pinheiro, 2023a). It is in this context, however, that we see the enthusiasm and evidence of the interest of this type of project in the interviews with parents. Access to the outdoors as a driver of the relationship between nature, health and well-being; access to nature as a driver of learning and development; the link between the outdoors and the freedom of choice offered to children.

The researchers' initial concern about parents' acceptance of the dirty clothes the children brought home was overcome by the evidence parents found. Children's behaviours of well-being and joy were evident. The fact that the whole project was developed in partnership with the parents helped to prevent any possible constraints. Parents knew what was going on in the classroom and were asked to participate by enriching the mud kitchen and bringing in materials.

When the interviews were carried out at the end of the school year, parents suggested:

- **More frequent implementation of this type of dynamic:**

"I think they should go more often. Even when it's cold they should go every time. Maybe it's better for their behaviour, it breaks the routine. Pull them to another area" (E2)

- **Extending the project to kindergarten:**

"They could extend the project. At two years old it makes sense, but at 3 and 4 years old it also makes sense." (E5)

- **Proposals for improvement:**

"J likes to play with this. She'd have a lot of fun if there were other elements like rice, beans, pasta, etc. The idea that she's really cooking" (E8)

- They also emphasise **the importance of their own participation**, saying: "I thought it was really good; I'd like to contribute more" (E7); "It's all perfect" Just the fact of having built this project already makes the school-family connection" (E1).

We believe that this data collection process has had several consequences for the role of the nursery teacher. On one hand, it has allowed us to get to know families better, in order to plan more personalised interventions geared towards the children's real needs. On the other hand, it allowed parents to reflect on the importance of access to less formal, less modelled and adult-organised contexts for children's learning, well-being and health. It also encouraged parents to take part in the project by bringing materials to use in the mud kitchen. Finally, it prepared families for the introduction of a new piece of equipment in the room that would cause a change in the children's clothing.

Our intention is to encourage a movement among families to value the relationship between children and nature. There's no bad weather, no stains, no sleeves and knees painted earthy brown - there are only bad clothes.

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