




ROLE PLAY AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: A HISTORICAL-CULTURAL VIEW¹

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Abstract

This research aims to study the relationships between social role-playing and the construction of knowledge for preschool children. The guiding question is: How can social role-playing contribute to the learning and development of preschool children? The aim is to analyze the role of social role-playing as a pedagogical tool in the construction of knowledge and pedagogical practice based on the activity itself, from a historical-cultural perspective. It is a theoretical study, based on classical authors such as Vygotsky (1996, 2017), Leontiev (1987, 2001), Elkonin (1987) and contemporary authors, Pasqualini, (2006, 2016), Lazaretti and Magalhães (2019) and Cheroglu (2014), from Historical-Cultural Theory. The results showed that role-playing can contribute to children's learning and development, as long as teachers understand that such an activity guides this period of development and the importance of the necessary conditions for playing and, with this, the construction of knowledge through the expansion of cultural repertoires. From the theoretical implications, the suggestion was derived to organize thematic boxes as a pedagogical tool.

Keywords: Role play; Child Education; Cultural Historical Theory.

How to cite

MAGALHÃES, Cassiana; ALMEIDA, Clarissa Nascimento. Role play as a pedagogical tool in the construction of knowledge: a Historical-Cultural view. *Educação em Análise*, Londrina, v. 10, p. 1-17, 2025. DOI: 10.5433/1984-7939.2025.v10.52232.



¹ Translation performed with the assistance of AI-GEMINI

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A BRINCADEIRA DE PAPÉIS SOCIAIS COMO FERRAMENTA PEDAGÓGICA NA CONSTRUÇÃO DO CONHECIMENTO: UM OLHAR HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL

Resumo: Esta pesquisa tem por objeto de estudo as relações entre a brincadeira de papéis sociais e a construção do conhecimento para crianças na idade pré-escolar. A questão norteadora é: Como a brincadeira de papéis sociais pode contribuir para a aprendizagem e desenvolvimento das crianças na idade pré-escolar? Com o objetivo de analisar o papel da brincadeira de papéis sociais como ferramenta pedagógica na construção do conhecimento e da prática pedagógica fundamentada na própria atividade, a partir da perspectiva histórico-cultural. É um estudo de natureza teórica, fundamentado em autores clássicos, como Vigotski (1996, 2017), Leontiev (1987, 2001), Elkonin (1987) e contemporâneos, Pasqualini, (2006, 2016), Lazaretti e Magalhães (2019) e Cheroglu (2014), da Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Os resultados evidenciaram que a brincadeira de papéis pode contribuir com a aprendizagem e desenvolvimento das crianças, desde que haja compreensão por partes dos professores, que tal atividade guia esse período de desenvolvimento e a importância das condições necessárias para brincar e com isso, a construção de conhecimentos por meio da ampliação dos repertórios culturais. Das implicações teóricas, derivou-se como sugestão a organização de caixas temáticas como ferramenta pedagógica.

Palavras-chave: Brincadeira de papéis sociais; Educação Infantil; Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

EL JUEGO DE ROLES SOCIALES COMO HERRAMIENTA PEDAGÓGICA EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL CONOCIMIENTO: UNA MIRADA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL

Resumen: La Esta investigación tiene como objetivo estudiar las relaciones entre el juego de roles sociales y la construcción de conocimiento en niños preescolares. La pregunta clave es: ¿Cómo puede el juego de roles sociales contribuir al aprendizaje y desarrollo de los niños preescolares? El objetivo es analizar el papel del juego de roles sociales como herramienta pedagógica en la construcción de conocimiento y la práctica pedagógica basada en la propia actividad, desde una perspectiva histórico-cultural. Se trata de un estudio teórico, basado en autores clásicos como Vygotsky (1996, 2017), Leontiev (1987, 2001), Elkonin (1987) y autores contemporáneos como Pasqualini (2006, 2016), Lazaretti y Magalhães (2019) y Cheroglu (2014), desde la Teoría Histórico-Cultural. Los resultados mostraron que el juego de roles puede contribuir al aprendizaje y desarrollo infantil, siempre que los docentes comprendan que esta actividad guía este período de desarrollo y la importancia de las condiciones necesarias para el juego y, con ello, la construcción de conocimiento mediante la expansión de repertorios culturales. A partir de las implicaciones teóricas, se sugirió organizar cajas temáticas como herramienta pedagógica.

Palabras clave: Juego de roles sociales; Educación Infantil; Teoría Histórico-Cultural.

Introduction

The Historical-Cultural Theory (HCT) understands that a child's development is a result of their surrounding environment. From this perspective, learning is guided by the main activity of the corresponding age period, known as the leading activity.

This study emphasizes the leading activity of the preschool period, which is social role-playing, understood as "[...] the assimilation by the child of human cultural behaviors constituted socially and historically" (Davidov; Shuare, 1987, p. 11, our translation). This child experiences the cultural universe through social role-playing. Given this, this investigation aims to answer the problem: How can social role-playing contribute to the learning and development of children in the preschool period?

This study is justified because it values this leading activity as a pedagogical tool based on Historical-Cultural Theory and offers theoretical support to educators and pedagogy students in creating intentional practices that promote the child's social and cultural development. The general objective of this research was to analyze the role of social role-playing as a pedagogical tool in the construction of knowledge and pedagogical practice, based on the activity itself, from a historical-cultural perspective. To this end, the following specific objectives were proposed: to reflect on the specificities of the psychic development of preschool children and; to discuss the necessary conditions for social role-playing to contribute to the learning and development process of the preschool child.

This study is theoretical in nature, with a qualitative analysis of the data (Demo, 1998), supported by Historical-Cultural Theory and classical authors such as Vigotski (1996, 2000, 2017, 2018), Elkonin (1987), Leontiev (1987, 1978a, 1978b, 2001) and Davidov and Shuare (1987). It also includes contemporary authors such as Pasqualini (2006, 2009), Pasqualini and Abrantes (2013), Pasqualini and Eidt (2016), Lazaretti and Magalhães (2019), and Cheroglu (2014).

The Psychic Development of the Preschool Child and Its Specificities

According to Davidov and Shuare (1987), age is a period with certain qualitative specificities regarding the human psyche. Given this, the period selected for this study is childhood, specifically the preschool age. The learning and development process of this young

child can be understood through the lens of the Historical-Cultural Theory, conceptualized and defended by Vigotski (2017) and contributors.

This theoretical framework emphasizes the impact of culture and history on the development of a child's psyche. It thus assumes an interdependent nature of elementary, biological, and higher psychological functions in the child-environment relationship. The Historical-Cultural Theory is therefore based on two principles:

[...] that originate in the child's sociocultural development process and form the external line of evolution of symbolic activity, which exists parallel to the internal line, represented by the cultural development of formations such as practical intellect, perception, and memory (Vigotski, 2017, p. 57, our translation).

This unidirectional relationship between learning and development is pointed out by Vigotski (2017), so that the former precedes the latter during the process of forming these psychic structures. Furthermore, sociocultural foundations also play an important role in the child's educational journey.

To understand this process, it is necessary to describe the higher psychological functions, such as "[...] perception, memory, attention [...]" (Vigotski, 2017, p. 60, our translation), which are intimately related to historical patterns, in contrast to the elementary functions, which are biological in nature. They arise as a result of the appropriation of culture into primordial psychic structures. In other words, Pasqualini and Abrantes (2013, p. 16) explain that "[...] through the appropriation of cultural signs, impulsive and reactive behavior gradually gives way to deliberate and intentional conduct, self-regulated and mediated by language and other symbolic cultural tools [...]".

However, it is necessary to state that these elementary functions do not disappear. Rather, they are combined with the higher functions, thus becoming subservient to and dominated by them. In accordance with Vigotski's (2000) studies, it is understood that the natural and cultural lines of human development coincide and integrate with adjacent ones. In other words, "[...] the biological maturation of the organism itself - and in particular of the nervous system - is conditioned by the individual's sociocultural experience" (Pasqualini; Eidt, 2016, p. 101).

The hierarchical structure and reciprocal determination of the human psychic system, which is interfunctional with the subject's experiences, is also emphasized. The socially and historically shaped basis of development, which occurs in different periods, forms the

circumstances surrounding the emergence and complexity of higher psychological functions. It is inferred that in every period of development, one system experiences greater growth, while others, in comparison, develop more slowly and unevenly. Therefore,

[...] the appropriation of culture by people in the process of their collective activity and communication occurs in historically established forms, such as teaching and education. [...] As the contents of culture, teaching, and education are historically variable, the psychic development of man has a concrete historical character. That is, it presents different regularities in different historical periods (Davidov, 1987, p. 7, our translation).

As a result, during each period of human development, new functions appear, and there are changes in how they interact with each other. The critical function of perception in early life is highlighted, as it establishes the foundation for later cultural processes and provides an understanding of this complex dynamic. "[...] For Vygotskian theory, perception is a central psychic function in this period, which configures the basis on which the development of the other functions is consolidated" (Pasqualini; Eidt, 2016, p. 122).

This psychic restructuring resulting from perception leads to changes in children's behavior, which provides explanations for the learning and development of the child in early childhood. New meanings are given

[...] as the child appropriates words, their perception of the world's objects becomes semantic, and they begin to perceive objects as belonging to a given category [...], thus becoming increasingly capable of grasping the relationships between them (Pasqualini; Eidt, 2016, p. 105).

It is important to emphasize that from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory, development is not divided into natural stages of the human being, but rather into periods that are particular and conditioned by the subject's historical context. From this perspective, in each period

[...] an explicit contradiction arises between the child's way of life and their potential, which have already surpassed this way of life. Accordingly, their activity is reorganized, and they thus move to a new stage in the development of their psychic life (Leontiev, 2001, p. 66).

Each period of a child's development involves modest differentiations in their psychological constitution, therefore, "[...] gradual and slow changes (evolution) occur, which

accumulate until they produce [...] a qualitative change (revolution) in the child's relationship with the world" (Pasqualini; Eidt, 2016, p. 102).

In this context, a critical period of child development is the change from an old to a new psychological moment, which denotes the revolution proposed by Pasqualini and Eidt (2016). This represents a transformative turning point marked by sudden alterations that occur in a short period due to the psychological paradoxes faced by the child, which result in a reconfiguration of their psychological functions. For Cheroglu (2014), this means that the child is aware of the new but also faces internal challenges and, with this change, is motivated to overcome obstacles and also aspires to learning progress in their childlike consciousness.

By considering that the entire course of a child's development is shaped during the specific period they are in, it is necessary to understand that this revolutionary process in the child's consciousness also adapts to neoformations, which are "[...] qualitatively new formations, with their own rhythm and which require being evaluated in a specific way" (Vigotski, 1996, p. 254, our translation).

Given this, a neoformation is understood to be characterized by the learning and development processes that occur when, for example, a child acquires a new way of thinking that was not previously present in their mental repertoire, influenced by a sociocultural interaction. In other words, "[...] they are new psychic formations, not previously existing and which are produced for the first time in the new period of development" (Pasqualini; Eidt, 2016, p. 105). With this, it is understood that

[...] the change in types of activity and in neoformations characterizes the general course of the psychic development of children from early childhood to adulthood. In the process of performing all the types of activities that govern it, the little ones assimilate their other historically formed capacities (Davidov; Shuare, 1987, p. 13, our translation).

Furthermore, Vigotski (1996) highlights the particularity of the child-environment relationship and emphasizes the need to look at it when identifying the child's age period and when considering future qualitative changes in their development. In the course of assimilating the complexity of child development, it is necessary

[...] to identify the qualitative change in the relationship they establish with the world in each age period. In each new period, a restructuring occurs in the child's psyche that encompasses the psyche as a whole. This restructuring at the same time produces and is produced by the change in the dominant activity (Pasqualini; Abrantes, 2013, p. 16).

A neoformation introduces substantial changes in the child's psychological and social domains and constitutes a unique remodeling that restructures, shapes, and reclassifies the child's individual action. These modifications, which are particular to each subject in their period of development, are vital in the formation of the child's internal and external consciousness, as well as in their overall development trajectory over time (Vigotski, 2000). In the preschool age, the present neoformation is imagination (Vigotski, 2018).

This study focuses on the characteristics of the child development process, also highlighting the fact that its internal dynamic does not derive from biological forces, but is intimately related to the cumulative forms and achievements experienced by the child in their previous periods. That said, it is emphasized "[...] that the internal character of this process does not refer to a biological character, but to the fact that each advance in development is directly determined by what was formed in the previous stage" (Pasqualini, 2009, p. 34).

The Historical-Cultural Theory emphasizes the relevance of cultural and historical influences in shaping the growing nature of children's psychological processes. In this way, it challenges reductionist perspectives that attribute development exclusively to biological maturation. In doing so, it offers a complete framework for understanding the complex interactions that occur throughout a lifespan between internal psychological processes and external sociocultural influences on the subject. Therefore, it is important to emphasize

[...] the child's knowledge about social reality comes from diverse sources, which include everything from daily contacts with people performing different social functions to knowledge transmitted by the teacher and obtained from books (Elkonin, 1987), with the preschool being given the important task of expanding the child's circle of contacts with reality (Pasqualini; Abrantes, 2013, p. 20).

The specificities of the psychic development of children in preschool exist and, therefore, under this theoretical perspective, it is necessary that pedagogical practices for preschool children are thought out and structured in the specificities of each given period, anchored in the previous one, and thus, create conditions for the child to experience different learnings and expand their cultural repertoire.

The Leading Activity of the Preschool Child and Contributions of Organizing Intentional Pedagogical Practice through Activity

In each period of a child's life, an activity that guides their development takes the place of a previous one, thus being called the principal or leading activity. According to Leontiev (1978a), the leading activity is the main type of activity that shapes a child's behavior and growth during certain periods of development. In other words,

[...] from these links, which unite processes oriented towards a purpose, [...] these enter into a relationship of subordination to the others, the general plot begins to be woven against which, gradually, the main lines of meaning of human activity are separated, those that characterize their personality (Leontiev, 1978a, p. 63, our translation).

Consequently, social role-playing is not the activity that the child spends most of their time doing, but rather it is the one in which the child is fully involved, intellectually, emotionally, physically, and which promotes the most qualitative psychic changes (Pasqualini, 2006).

Social role-playing is this activity that directs the construction of knowledge for children in the preschool age. Leontiev (1978a) states that the leading activity can be described by the construction and restructuring of psychic functions, as it is a variety of activities necessary for the psychological development of children in their respective periods. Children play in search of self-expression and understanding the world based on their observations.

Children can imitate the responsibilities and behaviors of adults, and play roles that are not directly accessible to them in real life. It is understood, therefore, that the "[...] game with a plot comes to occupy the fundamental place, in which the child accepts and plays one or another role that corresponds to the actions performed by adults" (Leontiev, 1978a, p. 512, our translation).

Social role-playing is understood as "[...] the assimilation by the child of human cultural behaviors constituted socially and historically" (Elkonin, 1987, p. 11, our translation). Thus, they immerse themselves in a complex world, whether they assume the roles of a teacher, doctor, parent, or a character from their favorite story.

Through this type of play, children can experience the information from their environment and understand the complexities of adult life, making it beneficial for a child's learning. According to Leontiev: "[...] The content of story games has an important educational

meaning" (Leontiev, 1978a, p. 513, our translation). As a result, social role-playing, pointed out by Leontiev (1978a) as story games, becomes a tool of the child's own, effective and dynamic in supporting their development in many areas, including the psychic and moral.

Intentional and theoretically grounded pedagogical practice in Early Childhood Education is important because, according to Elkonin (1987), the child, at the beginning of the preschool age, learns to understand the purpose of their activity after the systematized and grounded intervention of the adult. With this, the relevance of the teacher in mediating between the child and their sociocultural environment during the vital period of childhood is highlighted, by directing the development of the children.

The act of educating is to humanize the subject who is in the process of full citizenship formation, and thus, for the teacher, the determined purpose of their activity of educating is to teach the young child human culture and how to appropriate it. Therefore, from this theoretical assumption, it is understood that the appropriation of humanity is "[...] the result of an effective activity of the individual in relation to the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world created by the development of human culture" (Leontiev, 1978b, p. 271).

For the appropriation of human culture by the child to occur, the activity must be thought out and proposed intentionally by the teacher, as it happens through the activity itself. According to Leontiev (1978b), the individual appropriates the products of the construction of this humanity, such as its objects, and it is necessary to create an activity that incorporates its basic characteristics and accumulates them in the object through humanity itself and its form. In typical circumstances, the adult is the one who mediates knowledge to a child; it is they who show them how to see the world, handle new objects, and for what situations they are convenient. Just as,

[...] the child, the human being, must enter into a relationship with the phenomena of the surrounding world through other people, that is, in a process of communication with them. Thus, the child learns the appropriate activity. By its function, this process is, therefore, a process of education (Leontiev, 1978b, p. 272).

In contrast, in the school environment, humanizing oneself is a systematized, intentional, and analyzed process of education according to the period of life in which the child is. In this direction, Pasqualini (2006) states that the teacher is the reference adult for the young child, who systematizes the child's routine, leads and presents the characteristics and

specificities of human culture, present in cultural instruments, and teaches them to appropriate this knowledge developed by humanity.

Therefore, pedagogical action needs to be organized in advance and thought out from the resources the teacher has access to, as culture will only be internalized by the child if the teacher organizes their environment with rich possibilities for appropriation. According to Lazaretti and Magalhães: "[...] it is undoubtedly essential to support and aim for a pedagogical practice that is well-founded and coherent to develop actions favorable to child development, which begins to form through the teaching process carried out by adults" (Lazaretti; Magalhães, 2019, p. 14). It is understood that for a good pedagogical practice to occur for the learning and development of the young child in Early Childhood Education, the theoretical foundation is a basic component for the work of this teacher.

As a result of this study, the following factors were considered for the promotion of the leading activity of the period, namely: social role-playing: (1) Time for play: organizing specific moments for play ensures that it is experienced with the activity itself and, thus, they will have more chances of appropriating culture; (2) Child's accessibility to the material: this proposes more opportunities for interaction, the possibility of self-control of conduct by the child, and allows the handling of the tools made available by the teacher; (3) Diversity of materials: the more resources available to the child, the greater the chances they have of coming into contact with different cultural repertoires that are fundamental for their learning and psychic development. With their help, children can understand a variety of social roles and situations they encounter in daily life; (4) The teacher's interaction with the children, when they are invited to participate in these situations, can enrich the play with new experiences and by implementing new objects of human culture (Marcolino; Mello, 2015).

That said, one of the possibilities is to organize the space into thematic "corners" (Marcolino; Mello, 2015), considering the lack of space in educational institutions, another possibility is the construction of thematic boxes to create conditions in which social role-playing can occur in different spaces, as the boxes can be transported under a tree, to the schoolyard, or to a different room. We suggest items from the real world, relevant to specific themes of daily life. An example is provided in Table 1, with suggestions for pedagogical practice.

Table 1 - Thematic boxes in Early Childhood Education

Theme Box	Suggested Materials	Social Relations
Home life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kitchen utensils, such as cutlery, glasses, pots, pans, cloths, and baking tins; • Buckets and brooms; • Cell phones; • Mouse, keyboard, and monitor; • Television remote control; • Clean cleaning product packaging; • Aprons; • Dolls, to simulate caring for babies and children; • Calendars and clocks; • Notepads, to create shopping lists; • Other household items. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family relationships; • Responsibility at home; • Cooperation; • Organization; • Division of tasks.
Health care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cotton; • Adhesive bandages; • Toothbrushes; • Clean medicine containers; • Saline solution containers; • White coats to simulate healthcare professionals; • Stethoscope; • Thermometer; • Disposable masks; • Disposable gloves; • Needle-free syringe; • Printed images of exams or X-rays; • Patient records; • Disposable caps; • Among others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy; • Self-care; • Teamwork; • Communication; • Responsibility; • Prevention; • Basic health processes.
Market/Store	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money; • Cards; • Clean product packaging; • Labels or paper for children to price items; • Shopping bags; • Notepads; • Badges to identify store employees; • Clothing; • Cash register; • Shopping basket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business relations; • Customer service; • Organization; • Communication.

School life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notebooks; • School supplies, such as pencils, crayons, and sheets of paper; • Pencil cases; • Backpacks; • Books; • Provide a whiteboard so the child can role-play; • White lab coat, to role-play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-student relationship; • Cooperation; • Respect for the teacher; • Academic responsibilities.
Restaurant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pots; • Kitchen utensils, such as silverware, plates, and glasses; • Aprons, to simulate chefs; • Placemats; • Paper and pens, for children to create the establishment's menu; • Menu suggestions; • Trays, ladles, and spoons for serving food; • Napkins; • Tablecloths; • Cash register; • Card machine; • Cards and cash; • Telephone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer service; • Business relationships; • Communication; • Logical thinking; • Responsibility.
Hairdresser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hair combs and brushes; • Plastic scissors; • Spray bottle containers; • Portable mirrors; • Clean shampoo, conditioner, and cream containers for different hair types; • Hairdressing cape; • Hair dryer; • Manicure supplies, such as nail files and empty nail polish containers; • Cash register; • Credit card machines; • Cards and cash. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for differences; • Business relationships; • Teamwork; • Problem solving.
Artistic life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paintbrushes; • Paper; • Various paints, such as natural paints and gouache; • Aprons; • Painting easels; • Speakers; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork; • Artistic expression; • Appreciation of art; • Respect for others and their creations; • Leadership; • Organization of ideas.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clothing;• Hats and masks;• Carpet, for a performance stage;• Musical instruments, such as flutes, maracas, tambourines, and drums;• Cameras;• Portable mirrors;• Microphones.	
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Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

By organizing spaces in Early Childhood Education and creating the right conditions, teachers enable children to have different experiences that simulate the adult world. When this process is done in an organized way for role-playing to happen, it creates conditions for the child to develop a greater awareness of the social environment in which they live. It is also important to mention that such spaces or thematic boxes can be organized with the class and even involve the local community.

Therefore, preschool pedagogical practice, when based on an understanding of its specific period and leading activity, social role-playing, can contribute to the child's learning and development process. It is understood that the teacher's intentional practice is a condition for the learning and development processes of the young child to occur.

Final Considerations

In this study, we investigated the unique aspects of the psychic development of preschool children from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory, developed by Vygotsky and other authors. According to this perspective, a child should be understood holistically, which leads teachers to consider the broader socio-historical environment and the cumulative effects of previous experiences.

A child's development is marked by incremental changes that eventually lead to more significant transformations in their psyche. The child's experiences with their sociocultural environment are essential for the development of their higher psychological processes. Basing pedagogical practice on the leading activity present in their life period contributes to the educational process.

In response to the research question of this study: How can social role-playing contribute to the learning and development of children in the preschool age? It was possible to show that

for play to be a contributing factor, some conditions are essential: (a) organization of space; (b) children's free time; (c) time for children with the teacher and other colleagues; and (d) a pedagogical practice theoretically grounded in the period.

By revisiting our objectives, we proposed reflections on the psychic development of the preschool child and addressed the necessary conditions for social role-playing to contribute to their learning, from an HCT perspective. This research resulted in a table with suggestions for thematic "boxes" for teachers, so that this grounded pedagogical organization can create possibilities for social role-playing to occur in the preschool child.

Thus, we understand the importance of the relationship between learning and development, emphasizing how a child's activity reorganizes in each period of development, leading to qualitative changes in their perception of the world. The role that education plays in humanizing the child is recalled, and the teacher's place in mediating this human culture and creating learning opportunities that enable children to appropriate it is highlighted. That said, we wish to contribute to the practice of Early Childhood Education teachers regarding the possibilities of human development during the preschool period.

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CRediT

Recognition:	Not applicable
Financing:	Not applicable
Conflict of interest:	The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interests that represent a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
Ethical approval:	Not applicable
Authors' contribution:	MAGALHÃES, C. declares having participated in the writing of the article and claims to have been responsible for conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, and investigation. ALMEIDA, C. N. declares having participated in the methodology, writing – original draft; supervision, validation, visualization, writing – review, and editing.

Submitted: April 18, 2025
Accepted: June 06, 2025
Published: August 21, 2025

Section editor: João Fernando de Araújo
Production team member: Daniella Caroline R. R. Ferreira Mesquita
Editorial assistant: Martinho Gilson Cardoso Chingulo