





## APPROACH OF THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL THEORY TO PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This bibliographic work aimed to examine the importance of the contributions of Historical-Cultural Theory to play in Early Childhood Education within the process of human development. To this end, it sought to demonstrate how play is a fundamental activity for the integral development of children, grounded in the Historical-Cultural Theory as articulated in the works of Vygotsky (1896-1934), Leontiev (1903-1979), and Elkonin (1904-1984). The significance of these reflections lies in recognizing that play is not merely a recreational or natural activity, but a central element in the process of human formation. As highlighted in this literature, it is through play that children can experiment with different movements, which aids in their motor development and coordination. Together, the theories of these Soviet authors demonstrate that play is a vital activity for the holistic development of the child, fostering the acquisition of essential cognitive and social skills. Therefore, the contributions of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin are crucial for understanding how play can be a powerful educational tool, transforming the learning environment and promoting the full development of children. In conclusion, play, when developed within the framework of Historical-Cultural Theory in early childhood, plays a crucial role in meaningful learning and the humanization of children.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education; Historical-Cultural Theory; Childhood; Pedagogical practice; Play.

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## ABORDAGEM DA TEORIA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL PARA O BRINCAR NA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL

**Resumo:** Este trabalho bibliográfico buscou verificar a importância das contribuições da Teoria Histórico-Cultural para o brincar na Educação Infantil no processo de formação humana. Neste intuito, buscar-se-á verificar como o brincar é uma atividade fundamental para o desenvolvimento integral das crianças, fundamentando-se a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural, legitimada nas obras de Vygotsky (1896-1934), Leontiev (1903-1979) e Elkonin (1904-1984). A importância de tais reflexões reside em considerar que o brincar não é uma mera atividade recreativa e natural, mas um elemento central no processo de formação humana. Conforme exposto por essa literatura, é por meio do brincar que as crianças podem experimentar diferentes movimentos, o que as auxilia no seu desenvolvimento motor e em sua coordenação. Em conjunto, as teorias dos autores soviéticos demonstram que o brincar é uma atividade vital para o desenvolvimento integral da criança, promovendo a aquisição de habilidades cognitivas e sociais essenciais. Portanto, as contribuições de Vygotsky, Leontiev e Elkonin são fundamentais para entender como o brincar pode ser uma poderosa ferramenta educativa, transformando o ambiente de aprendizagem e promovendo o desenvolvimento pleno das crianças. Conclui-se, assim, que o brincar, desenvolvido a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural na primeira infância, desempenha um papel crucial para um aprendizado significativo na humanização das crianças.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Infantil; Teoria Histórico-Cultural; Infância; Prática pedagógica; Brincar.

## ENFOQUE DE LA TEORÍA HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL PARA EL JUEGO EN LA EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL

**Resumen:** Este trabajo bibliográfico buscó verificar la importancia de las contribuciones de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural para el juego en la Educación Infantil en el proceso de formación humana. Con este propósito, se intentará comprobar cómo el juego es una actividad fundamental para el desarrollo integral de los niños, basándose en la Teoría Histórico-Cultural, legitimada en las obras de Vygotsky (1896-1934), Leontiev (1903-1979) y Elkonin (1904-1984). La importancia de estas reflexiones radica en considerar que el juego no es una mera actividad recreativa y natural, sino un elemento central en el proceso de formación humana. Según lo expuesto por esta literatura, es a través del juego que los niños pueden experimentar diferentes movimientos, lo que les ayuda en su desarrollo motor y en su coordinación. En conjunto, las teorías de los autores soviéticos demuestran que el juego es una actividad vital para el desarrollo integral del niño, promoviendo la adquisición de habilidades cognitivas y sociales esenciales. Por lo tanto, las contribuciones de Vygotsky, Leontiev y Elkonin son fundamentales para entender cómo el juego puede ser una poderosa herramienta educativa, transformando el ambiente de aprendizaje y promoviendo el desarrollo pleno de los niños. Se concluye, así, que el juego, desarrollado a partir de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural en la primera infancia, desempeña un papel crucial para un aprendizaje significativo en la humanización de los niños.

**Palabras clave:** Educación Infantil; Teoría Histórico-Cultural; Infancia; Práctica pedagógica; Juego.

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## **Introduction**

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Childhood is a period marked by intense discoveries and interactions, in which play performs an essential role in development. Thus, by understanding the body as an instrument for exploring the environment, the child promotes interaction with themselves, with others, and with the world. In this sense, it is perceived that play, strongly present in childhood, plays a fundamental role in the early years of schooling (Vygotsky, 1998). Therefore, investigating the relationship between play and learning becomes essential to understand how the experiences lived by the child contribute to cognitive, emotional, and social development.

With Early Childhood Education incorporated into Basic Education from the enactment of Law nº 12.796/2013 (Brasil, 2013) of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Brasil, 1996), and furthermore, recognizing its importance not only as a child's right but as an essential educational segment for their development, it becomes necessary to discuss teaching practices based on educational theories that contribute to overcoming many teaching practices that are developed in this educational period regarding play and that need understanding to promote the physical and psychological development of children.

Understanding that the human being is an integrated whole, where body and mind mutually influence each other, it must be recognized that this integration allows the teacher to contribute to the full development of the individual, promoting both the education of motor and cognitive aspects. In this sense, it was perceived that teaching through play should not be restricted only to the motor character but should also be directed towards intellectual functions (Melo; Molina, 2018).

To this end, verifying that Soviet Psychology, developed during the 20th century, made profound contributions regarding play in Early Childhood Education, we have in Vygotsky (1896-1934), Leontiev (1903-1979), and Elkonin (1904-1984) the theoretical assumptions that enrich the pedagogical work of teachers in the early years of a child's schooling.

Given the above, this bibliographic review sought to highlight the importance of the contributions of the Historical-Cultural Theory to play in Early Childhood Education in the process of human formation. In this understanding, it is hoped that this study can contribute to initial and continuing education in the educational area, providing subsidies that enrich the literature of the area, pointing out possible paths to be followed for the improvement of learning and the integral development of children from early childhood education.

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## **Materials and methods**

For this investigation, a bibliographic study was used among the qualitative methods, in which works by different authors who support and unfold the problem questions proposed for the investigation were investigated. As presented by Gil (1996), when carrying out bibliographic research, it becomes possible to envision a better view of the problem, allowing, from the qualitative analysis of the theoretical-bibliographic material, reflections on the study topic, expanding the field of discussions. As education is part of the human sciences and a phenomenon that occurs socially, qualitative research applied to this area is understood as an important set of interpretive techniques that describe the components of a complex social system, loaded with meanings.

Given the above, it is hoped to contribute to the knowledge pertinent to the pedagogical practice of the teacher in early childhood education, promoting reflections that enable the transformation of the social reality of the school through play intentionally developed and planned by the teacher.

## **Revisão de literatura**

The analysis of play in this work stems from the reflections proposed by the perspective of Soviet psychology. Therefore, it becomes necessary to analyze the importance of play activities carried out with children through the intentional mediation of the teacher, which contribute to the process of child development.

In these terms, it is worth highlighting here how Soviet psychology originated and how Historical-Cultural Psychology developed. Through the analysis of Lomov's (1989) investigation, which studied the history of Soviet psychology and its development over the years, it was verified that it was in the 16th and 17th centuries that Russian philosophers began to pay attention to problems that we currently call psychological. Since then, these scholars began to raise questions about the formation and development of personality, as well as to establish the interrelation between the brain and the psyche.

Given the deepening of studies by materialist philosophers of the former Soviet Union, it can be verified that these scholars began to create theses about psychic phenomena, highlighting that these do not exist by themselves but are integrated into the various phenomena of the material world.

From the perspective of Soviet psychology, the human psyche originates from the historical phenomena accumulated by humans and transmitted socially to succeeding generations. This conception would give rise to the Historical-Cultural Theory as a branch of Soviet psychology.

As presented by Silva and Hai (2011), Historical-Cultural Psychology was a school founded by Vygotsky and his collaborators, which also became known as the Vygotsky School:

Historical-Cultural Psychology has as its main references **Liev Semiónovich Vygotsky** (1896-1934), **Alexis Nikoláevich Leontiev** (1903-1979), and Alexander Románovich Luria (1902-1977), who, together with representatives such as **Daniíl Borisovich Elkonin** (1904-1984); Vasili Vasilievich Davidov (1930-1998); Alexandr Vladimirovich Zaporozhets (1905-1981); Piotr Iakovlevich Galperin (1902-1988), and Lidia Ilínichna Bozhovich (1908-1981) comprise the so-called Vygotsky School (Silva; Hai, 2011, p. 6, emphasis in the original).

Among these, Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin stand out in the study of play for child development. The integration of the theories of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin provides a comprehensive view of the importance of play in this period of childhood and demonstrates that play goes beyond a playful and spontaneous activity, but is an essential component of the child's integral development, preparing them for the complexities of adult life.

### **Play in Vygotsky's Perspective**

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According to the studies carried out by Ivan Ivic (2010), Lev Semionovich Vygotsky was born in 1896 in a small village called Orsha in Belarus. Recognized as one of the greatest psychologists of the 20th century, Vygotsky, from 1912 onwards, pursued his university studies in law, philosophy, and history in Moscow. His research developed amidst the historical transformations resulting from the Russian Revolution of 1917.

During this time, he began to dedicate himself to the study of psychology, in which he constructed his theory to explain mental development. Within a decade (1924-1934), Vygotsky, together with a group of collaborators, created the Historical-Cultural Theory of psychological phenomena, from which his name would be eternally linked to the studies of psychology.

Vygotsky's perspective emphasizes that human development is inseparable from social interactions and cultural contexts, reinforcing the idea that subjectivity is constituted in relation to the other. For Facci (2004), the historical changes in society and material life promoted

changes in human consciousness and behavior. Thus, the change in the psyche has a close relationship with the individual's life and their social relations.

Regarding the importance attributed by Vygotsky to play, it is presented to us that the child creates imaginary situations during this play, leading to the development of abstract thought; because the relationships developed during play, meaning-object-action, are constantly created and recreated by them, contributing to the development of their childhood consciousness (Friedmann, 2012). Thus, in Vygotsky's (1998) conception, abstract thought is characterized by the ability to operate with symbols and meanings dissociated from immediate physical objects, allowing the child to plan actions, solve problems symbolically, and internalize social rules.

Another idea defended by Friedmann (2012) highlights the learning processes that drive developmental processes, considering the importance given by Vygotsky to the socio-historical dimension of psychological functioning and social interaction in the construction of the human being. It is the learning generated by a cultural environment that awakens the internal developmental processes in the child.

In this context, a culturally rich environment of play – which offers a diversity of stimuli and interactions – expands the possibilities of symbolic mediation, essential for the child to explore different social roles and languages specific to their surroundings (Vygotsky, 1998). Thus, the intervention of more mature members of the culture, such as teachers, becomes necessary for the child to learn historically accumulated knowledge.

It was Vygotsky (2008) who studied the acquisition of knowledge, understanding the individual as a historical-social being. For the author, higher psychological functions – such as memory, voluntary attention, and abstract thought – are constructed as humans appropriate historical-social experiences, which occur through interaction with other individuals and with the social environment.

In this sense, it can be verified that it is in the act of playing that the child becomes this historical-social being, since it is through play that they make their first interpretations of the world. It is through play that the child experiences different social roles, albeit symbolically, in the world of make-believe. Thus, play activities, from this perspective, aim to generate in the child the ability to understand the relationships between the cultural knowledge accumulated by humanity, which humanizes them and inserts them into their community.

Furthermore, it is in play that the child resignifies the empirical object in a symbolic way, attributing new roles and meanings to it. Although there are materials for play with

empirical objectives, usually used by the teacher, they take on another form when they are resignified by the child in the world of make-believe. In this process, experiences are expanded, as the child transcends the materiality of the object and transforms it into a resource for the expression of their imagination and creativity.

Given the above, we perceive that Vygotsky's contributions are fundamental to the understanding of child development, since his work provided a basis for other authors, such as Leontiev and Elkonin, to enrich and expand his ideas, especially with regard to the role of play in the formation of consciousness in childhood. Next, we will see the specific contributions that these authors brought to Soviet psychology, deepening the relationship between play and childhood.

### **Play in Leontiev's Perspective**

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Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev (1903-1979) was a Soviet psychologist who continued Vygotsky's work. As Duarte (2004) presents, together with Vygotsky and Luria, these scholars are considered the three international references not only for psychology but also for other areas such as education and sociology, given that their theory has a social character, being of fundamental importance for human formation in the educational field.

Based on Leontiev's writings, it can be stated that humans are not born with aptitudes or human historical skills, as these are acquired and created throughout the experiences they develop in society.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the child is a candidate for this humanization. In this way, such humanization must be rescued in the material world for the psychological world to develop. The more society's development grows, the more vital and complex is the role of education in the humanization process, because it is through education that each individual appropriates human culture and truly humanizes themselves.

Regarding the contributions of the Soviet author to play in childhood, his work conveys the conviction that play is a dominant activity in preschool children:

We call that activity leading, in connection with which the most important changes in the child's psyche development occur and within which psychic processes develop that prepare the way for the child's transition to a new and higher level of development (Leontiev, 1988, p. 122).

From this author's perspective, the leading activity or dominant activity is characteristic at different moments of human life. Thus, play is the dominant activity that will contribute to new formulations of thought, also contributing to learning and child development.

In Leontiev's (2001) conception, play manifests itself in the child's contradiction when experiencing the adult routine, as they do not yet master the operations required to perform adult tasks, considering that they have no real need to do them.

As we can see in Sommerhalder and Alves (2011), the child manipulates the imaginary based on their deepest feelings, especially in those social experiences in which they engage with adult life. These games, for the most part, are driven by the desire to be an adult. The child thinks that the adult can do everything, that they are omnipotent, that they have dominion over reality; the child often sees the adult as a superhero.

As verified in Leontiev's (1987) studies, it is in the abstract activity concretized by make-believe play that the child appropriates the concepts of the world. In preschool children, play is much more a part of ideas than of things. In this sense, the mediation carried out by the adult — through intentionally organized activities and culturally elaborated instruments — promotes qualitative transformations in the child's psychic structure, reconfiguring their relationship with reality and driving the development of higher psychological functions.

Leontiev (1987) explains that the period of childhood, especially when the child is of preschool age, is when the initial formation of their personality occurs. Therefore, it is during this period of life that the first bonds and relationships are established, which contribute to the formation of the unity of personality.

For Leontiev (1987), the unity of personality is configured as a dynamic and hierarchical system of motives that organize and direct the child's conscious activity, integrating their actions, emotions, and thoughts into a coherent structure. In early childhood, especially during the preschool period, this unity emerges from the leading activity (make-believe play), in which the child experiences social roles and cultural norms, internalizing them through adult mediation. By assuming symbolic functions (such as "doctor," "teacher," or "parent"), they not only reproduce behaviors but reorganize their motives – transforming immediate desires into objectives mediated by social rules. Thus, personality is a dialectical process in which practical activity, mediated by cultural instruments and social relations, structures consciousness and identity.

Given the above, we start from the assumption that in Early Childhood Education, it is possible to use an education committed to a critical teaching proposal. For, as indicated by

Leontiev, part of the child's personality is already developed in the early school years, thus influencing the individual's personality.

As Bissoli (2014) writes, throughout the development of personality, the child goes through different periods that modify their intellect. Initially, in the first years of institutionalized schooling, through perception and the detachment of their body through space. In a second moment, with the development of speech, where they begin to appropriate the names of things and, especially in this investigation, in the period from 3 to 6 years where play activities assume the main role in their integral development.

In Leontiev's (1987) view, children assimilate the human ways of the society in which they are inserted, assimilate human communications, and begin to master language. Thus, the child, from the age of two, consciously guides themselves by what they see and hear from adults, beginning to manifest themselves from their own initiative; these are the first steps in the formation of their autonomy.

Given the above, we can understand Leontiev's main contributions to the Historical-Cultural Theory. We perceive that by assuming symbolic roles and engaging in imaginary situations, the child internalizes social norms and cultural instruments mediated by the adult. Therefore, when investigating play, the aim is not only to study a phase of development but to understand a dialectical mechanism that lays the foundations for consciousness, creativity, and human identity.

### **Play in Elkonin's Perspective**

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Daniil B. Elkonin (1904-1984) developed his studies based on the research already carried out by Vygotsky. Among his contributions in the area of play, the concept of role-playing game stands out. For Friedmann (2012), the child plays by placing themselves in the social position of the adult. Their daily life activities are expressed in play, responding to problem situations in their own way.

Based on Elkonin's (1978) studies and reflections on the role-playing game, it is possible to affirm that play, as the leading activity in childhood, can occur in any context in which the child is inserted, as long as it is permeated by a social environment that stimulates their imagination and creativity. Through their observations of the adult world, the child reinterprets and recreates daily situations, transforming them into playful actions that express their

understanding of social and cultural relations. In this way, role-playing emerges as an appropriation of social relations, mediated by the interactions and experiences that the child experiences in their surroundings.

However, it should be noted that there are limitations in playing individually, carried out at home by the child, as this activity cannot be fully replaced by collective play. While the toy used at home often becomes the child's only companion, offering a relatively limited contribution to their development, collective play, typical of the school environment, assumes a fundamental role in the construction of social consciousness.

It is through collective activities and the teacher's mediation that the child recognizes themselves as a being of social nature, inserted in a set of relationships that promote significant learning and conscious development. Thus, although individual play has its value, it is in the context of social interactions that the child broadens their understanding of the world, internalizes cultural norms, and consolidates their identity as an integral part of a community.

The vast Soviet research carried out on children's games sought to gather characteristic data from groups of children of different preschool ages. These results recognize that there are inherent peculiarities for each period of the child's life, thus becoming guiding parameters, generating starting points and references in research on the role-playing game (Elkonin, 1978).

Among the analyzed results, it can be highlighted that role-playing games contribute to voluntary memorization and recall, imagination and thought, perception, in other words, to the development of higher psychological functions. The importance of games is not reduced to exercises of separate psychic processes but acts on various psychic functions of children's personality jointly (Elkonin, 1987).

In Elkonin's (1978) view, the role-playing game is not an exercise, as the objective is not to create habits in students or encourage them to take on a specific character chosen to enact in the future. However, the author indicates that play is characteristic of the world that surrounds the child. For Elkonin (1978), the themes of young children's games, from 3 to 4 years old, contain brief fragmented episodes of personal life and the environment in which they are inserted.

Furthermore, Elkonin (1978) presents some fundamental playful elements for the role-playing game, which are: the role of the character chosen by the child; the situation in which the representation of the role takes place, in fact, occurring through events close to what the child has already observed or experienced; the actions with which the role is interpreted, which may even be inconsistent with reality; the objects with which the actors want to play, often

assuming another resignified concept; and the relationship with the other character, highlighting social relations with the other.

As evidenced throughout this chapter, the study of the role-playing game, in light of Elkonin's theory, allows us to understand play as an essential activity for the child's psychic, social, and cultural development, in which they internalize norms, values, and cultural instruments, transforming them into tools for the construction of their autonomy and identity. This desire to place oneself in the position of someone superior expresses the child's yearning to recreate the actions of the adult who can do everything.

### **Final Considerations**

The analysis of the contributions of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin to the study of play reveals the depth and complexity of this activity in child development. The perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology, initially developed by Vygotsky and expanded by his followers, emphasizes that play is not just a playful act but an essential component for the child's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Vygotsky showed us that play is not just a playful expression but a space for the construction of abstract thought and the internalization of social norms, mediated by interaction with others and the cultural context. While Leontiev's studies, in turn, reinforced the idea that play is the leading activity in childhood, responsible for promoting qualitative transformations in the child's psychic structure by allowing them to experience social roles. Elkonin, for his part, contributed to Historical-Cultural Psychology through his theory of the role-playing game.

These perspectives converge on the understanding that play is a dialectical mechanism that articulates the child's subjectivity with the objective demands of culture. Through make-believe, the child not only reproduces adult actions but reinterprets them, resignifying objects and situations according to their experiences and observations.

Therefore, this work reinforces the importance of early childhood education that values play as the central axis of human development. The intentional mediation of the teacher, combined with a culturally rich and stimulating environment, is fundamental for the child to explore different social roles, internalize cultural norms, and develop their cognitive and emotional capacities. Future research may further explore how play articulates with other stages of development, expanding the understanding of its role in the formation of personality and in the mediation between the individual and society. Thus, by recognizing play as an essential

activity, we not only respect childhood but also contribute to the construction of a more human and conscious society.

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