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PRIEŠMOKYKLINIO  
UGDYMO  
PEDAGOGŲ RENGIMO PROBLEMATIKA**

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Tarptautinė mokslinė praktinė konferencija

## **IKIMOKYKLINIO IR PRIEŠMOKYKLINIO UGDYMO PEDAGOGŲ RENGIMO PROBLEMATIKA**

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# THE MEANING OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS CONCEPTIONS

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**Abstract.** The study presented in this article is part of a broader investigation, which took place from 2007 to 2011, and whose research focus was the praxiological transformation of a kindergarten institution, involving six educators and their groups of 25 children. The transformation carried out over the course of four years has led to the development of an experiential approach that values the action and agency of the child. It used a qualitative methodological approach, focusing on the conceptions of the educators about the type of activities and projects that were developed at the final moment of the investigation. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a script, and were used to assess the conceptions and practices developed at the institution. The data was collected from the interviews and from the field notes and subject to a heuristic analysis to discover the reality underlying the productions collected. From this study emerges that experiential based learning helps kindergarten teacher to reconstruct the image they had about the children. They started to see a competent child, with his choices, self-initiative, action-planning, and how they communicate them, develop them and reflect on their options, gathering the contribution of peers and adults.

**Keywords:** experiential learning; early childhood education, competent child.

## **1. The holistic action in early childhood education and the educational intentionality**

The concept of pedagogy in early childhood education has been used as a synonym of curricula, practice, teaching or learning (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). In a text that approaches the definition of pedagogy, Watkins e Mortimore (1999) define pedagogy as the “conscious activity of a person that contributes to facilitate the other person’s learning” (p. 3). This idea centres the concept of pedagogy in the value of learning in close connection with the different elements that contribute to the process. To Moss and Petrie (2002), pedagogy should be a relational and holistic approach, since the action of the teacher is intended to the child as a whole – the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity.

Another conceptual contribute about the concept is suggested by Paulo Freire (1996), saying that pedagogy is a way of interpreting the world, to dialogue, listen and be aware. This concept assumes a change in the emphasis of pedagogy, towards the pedagogy of interaction, where perspectives, questions and ideas are shared (Freire, 1996). This understanding of pedagogy supports democratic practices, where teachers and children express opinions and are listened. It is a relation pedagogy, stressed by Loris Malaguzzi (2008), in which children are actively involved in the joint development of knowledge, their own identities and the others identities (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2003).

According to Oliveira-Formosinho (2007c), pedagogy is organized around the knowledge that result from situated actions, together with the theoretical concepts (theory and knowledge) and the believes (believes, values and principles). Pedagogy is an ambiguous space “a fusion of three elements – the actions, theories and believes – in a constantly renewed and interactive triangulation” that is supported “in a *praxis*, i.e., the action born from the theory and supported by people believes” (p. 16). According to this, pedagogy exists within the *praxis*.

Scientific literature has been revealing that holistic and integrative pedagogical approaches, that recognize the competence of children and listen to their voices, have greater impact on their learning and their future life (Eurydice, 2009; OECD, 2004, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002). Regarding this, the Starting Strong III report (OECD, 2012) highlights that children learn better: i) with integrative pedagogical approaches, where social and cognitive learning are regarded as complementary and equally important; ii) when they are active and involved; iii) when the interactions are frequent and meaningful; iv) when the curricula is based on previous learning.

In particular, the afore mentioned report also highlights that curricula that value the self-initiated activities by children are more beneficial at a long term, they drive their participation in community services and motivates them to proceed studying. The quality of learning environments is considered, in some reports and scientific papers (Elliott, 2006; Evangelou, Sylva, Kyriacou, Wild, & Glenn, 2009), as one of the most important factors in the process of development and learning of children. The evidences refer, as meaningful elements in this process: i) the diversity of opportunities the learning experiences have; ii) the intentional organization of the environment and the quality and diversity of the available materials; iii) the experiences that value the contact with the nature (forest, field); iv) learning by playing; v) the existence of a structured, although flexible, daily and weekly routine; vi) the appreciation of the children culture as a pedagogical resource; vii) the involvement of parents in the school life of their children; viii) the respect of the children’s voice and the recognition of their participative competence; and ix) the existence of qualified teachers, deeply involved in professional development processes that support their own research and learning.

The development of a pedagogy based on experiential learning, that considers the children's rights and their participative competence (Mason, 2005), requires listening, observing, negotiating and acting to ensure participation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2007a; Formosinho & Oliveira-Formosinho, 2008). This kind of pedagogy is supported by several authors. This study is founded on the perspectives of Dewey and Bruner for the development of experiential based learning.

### **1.1 Dewey's foundations for the experiential based learning**

The conceptualizations of Dewey about the value of experience, interest, reflective thinking, democratic education are important foundations for pedagogy and for experiential based learning.

The idea of experiential learning based on the discovery led Dewey (2002) to redefine the curricula. By considering that the objective of learning is not the knowledge or the information, but the personal fulfilment, it denies the traditional approaches, saying that "the only meaningful method is the method of the mind that seeks to expand and assimilate" (2002, p. 161). In this sense, he considers that the role of the teacher should be side-by-side with the child, because "it is she, and not the content-subject, that determines both the quality and the quantity of the learning" (p. 161). The value of the experience, "fluent, embryonic, vital" as the true source of learning, leads him to understand that "the child and the curriculum are just two limits that define a single process" (p. 163).

He values the significance of the experimental method as an educational method. He argues that learning experience requires observing materials and processes, inquiring, following clues of ideas to discover connections, and carry out activities to test hypotheses. This process includes moments of observation, review and synthesis, analysis and discussion of the meaningful elements of the experience.

In this sense, the experience is the way to involve children in the intellectual work and problem solving that could be understood as relevant for their learning. Children are seen as researchers who take a reflexive attitude which involves reasoning and deliberating. This means that children are able to make questions and to find answers. For that they must be actively engaged in the selection of the material that can help them to think about the implications and the relationship between the material and the solution they are looking for (Dewey, 2002, p.128).

For Dewey (2001), reflective thinking is sustained on the value of the experience. The real experience lies in the combination of "the impression that things cause on us, the change in our actions, favouring some of them, resisting and checking others, and what we can do in them to produce further change" (p. 280). Consequently, he believes that educational situations should be based on the child's activity, what he describes as *learning by doing*. He argues that "the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience takes something from past experiences and changes, in any way, subsequent experiences" (Dewey, 1971, p. 26).

To consider the experience as truly educational, they should express a clear educational intention without representing the annulment of children's initiative and the expression of their creativity (Pinazza, 2007).

Dewey (1971) values the experience as a source of learning, assuming that all education is experiential action performed by the subject in a learning process in action. He also emphasizes the idea that the educational experience is a direct manifestation of life itself (Gamboa, 2004). In this regard, he recognizes the school as a physical and social environment that allows the child's growth. The school's aim is "first of all to live, and learn through the interaction with that experience" (Dewey, 2002, p. 41). Because of that, it is important to use the resources from the environment, promoting study visits, contacting with the natural environment, such as discovery of locus that broaden the experiences and knowledge.

Dewey gave a strong importance to the materials in the educational process. He considered that the materials must be 'real', direct and obvious, because he understood that the more natural and direct the experiences of children are, the more meaningful the learning experience is.

Dewey believed that education happens beyond the school. An overarching principle in Dewey is that the growth based on experiences does not have an end. It continues throughout one's life. In effect, Dewey saw education as an *experiential continuum* (Dewey, 1938, p. 28), a succession of knowledge, experiences, and individual growth – unique to each individual. This definition expresses the idea of a school as a laboratory of learning opportunities (Dewey, 1971). In this sense, school time must be flexible and move over the course of the experience moments, allowing children to: experience the materials and interact socially; talk, discuss, communicate; observe and interact with peers and adults so that they can take advantage from the action; cooperate and participate in the life of the group; reflect and become aware of what they did and what they need to do; discover the potential of experience and use it to solve problems; research to get the real meaning of the everyday experiences in the world they live in.

Dewey also argues that there is a second criterion of educational experience - the interaction. In his words, "every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had" (p. 34). This requires interaction, or the interplay between external (environment – "whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, and capacities to create the experience which is had" p.

44) and internal conditions. Thus, these two factors (*experiential continuum* and interaction) work together to articulate truly educational experiences. Situation after situation, an individual carries over something from one experience to the next (continuity). As this happens, that individual's world grows bigger, drawing more contact with a wider range of individuals/experiences (interaction).

In the end, the role of the educator must be to understand the capacities of the children and adapt the experiences they create to those individuals' needs at the present time.

For Dewey (2002), the living experience takes place through social interaction. Dewey's concept of togetherness focuses on the interactional complicity that is held through a mutual give and take: the teacher receives but he should not be afraid to also give.

### **1.2 Bruner's conceptual contribution to the experiential based learning**

The pedagogical conceptualization of Bruner (2000) emphasizes the idea that children's development should take place in an enabling environment where both the agency and the self-initiated work are promoted.

For Bruner (2000), self-initiation means to allow children to control what they want to do. It means that school should promote an enabling culture that encourages them to participate in their learning process, to be proactive, to learn in community and collaboratively, creating social or natural meanings about the world.

Valuing the environment and the culture, Bruner developed the idea of the folk pedagogy. He was concerned about how the children's minds work, but mainly with how children learn and what allows them to develop. The folk pedagogy values the common interaction, while activity helps children to see the world but also the constitutional role of culture in the construction of meanings (Bruner 2000).

According to Bruner (2000) the environment has a key role in the learning process. Action learning takes place through the manipulation of objects, not as mere imitative handling or breeding, but as action intentionally conducted by individual purpose. For him "the mind is an extension of the hands and of the tools we use" (p.198). The space where children learn should be an opportunity to act, think and communicate. It should be configured as a starting point that allows developing an effective sense of participation in an enabling community. However, the learning space is not conceived by the author merely as physical. The enabling action depends on the existence of a social context. For Bruner (1997) the artifacts lead children to different actions and because they are steeped in culture, they constitute a way of cultural appropriation. The author believes that thinking involves learning how to use cultural, symbolic and material tools considering the specificities of its use (Bruner, 1998).

The materials are conceived as opportunities for action and interaction that facilitate play. Regarding this, play allows to learn in situation, to think about the action, as well as the construction of social functioning rules.

The activity of manipulation objects through play favours dialogue and the construction of a narrative action.

This perspective emphasizes that the organization of time should favour the action of the child with the materials, experiencing their chances and the dialogue about their achievements. In this sense, every moment of the day should be a learning opportunity. The actions of adults developed during the daily routine should structure the spontaneous activity of the child (Smidt, 2011).

The ideas of Bruner (2000) about the importance of adult as a scaffold in the construction of children's meanings, highlight the importance of the dynamic of the daily routine that should be deeply interactive, conversational and reflective. The educational environment is conceived by Bruner (2000) from the sociocultural constructivist perspective that values the child's action in a cultural context, noting that there is an active interaction between reality and the subject in the construction of knowledge, feelings and emotions.

The importance given by Bruner (1998, 2000) to the experience and culture, leads him to emphasize that learning is not a passive act, not merely individual. The author asserts that learning is a construction "of ourselves as agents animated by self-generated intentions" (Bruner, 2000, p. 35) within communities, through exchange and negotiation that create a culture of participation. An important role of education is to help children to build a self-consciousness that necessarily involves the recognition of the other as an himself.

Children are viewed as thinking beings who build and share the meanings, through interactions with others and with the engagement with culture. This view highlights the important role of collaboration and dialogue that educators should promote with the children during the educational process. The interaction between the educator and the child must be a dialogic transaction to allow the child to complexify his thinking and make meaning of the world around him (Bruner, 1998).

However, he emphasizes that the support that the educator gives the child, should never replace the construction of meaning by himself. The educator is a scaffold that helps children construct meaning through collaboration and negotiation (Bruner, 2000, p.86).

From the perspective of Bruner (1997, 1998, 2000) the child is competent to perform intentional actions. He also states that learning is a complex process that will expand as the subject structure the meanings of the world. In this sense, the author considers that the activities should take into account four fundamental aspects: action, reflection, collaboration and culture.

Children can define their actions in order to achieve satisfaction, which makes them assumption makers. From this meaning, Bruner conceived the concept of *child's agency* (Smidt, 2011). Bruner (1984) refers that the activity contrasts with the mere movement. The activity requires conducting and regulating the movement to achieve some specific goal.

To regulate the intentional action, it is necessary to have the opportunity to compare what we try to do with what we do in fact, using this difference as a correction factor.

In this sense, the author reveals that intentionality precedes ability, noting that the deliberate intent on the use of objects will gradually show the child's autonomy.

Learning, as an act of motivation and discovery, should have the purpose of going beyond the transmission and repetition. Only the attitude of reflecting on the actions developed by oneself allows discovering the solutions. According to Bruner (1998, 2000), learning is only meaningful when built by oneself, which implies discovering. The author considered that there are two important experiential based learning strategies that help children to discover, to reflect, to collaborate and to contact with culture: play and the narrative.

Play provides an excellent opportunity to test the combination of behaviors that would never be tried under pressure. Repeated opportunities to play allows children to develop their observation skills and the ability to reflect upon actions.

Moreover, playing is connected with the symbolism that children give to materials, creating and adapting them to new situations. Accordingly, the symbolic processing of playing has consequences on the child's learning, serving as a vehicle for contact with social conventions. The narrative, as a mean of oral speech, describe facts in real or imagined sequences, that conveys the meaning.

### **1.3 Ingredients for an experiential based learning**

Some approaches that use experiential learning recognize the child as an active learner, who learns better with the activities he plans, develops and reflects on. This learning through action is defined as the learning in which the child build new understandings based on her actions, on the objects and on the interaction with people, ideas and events, leading to an opportunity for cognitive restructuring and development.

In these approaches, the educational intentionality is greatly valued. For the child to learn, he has to experience the world, reflect on it and create meanings from these experiences. The intentionality refers to the way adults interact with children and how they establish authentic relations, based on the shared development of thought (Epstein, 2007). All the curricular structure of the approach is intentionally structured to support active and experiential learning.

Both teachers and children are considered active learners. Teachers provide educational support, observing, interacting, challenging and playing with children. Adults use complex language while observing, supporting, and expanding the child's work to more complex levels. Adults encourage children to make choices, solve problems, supporting them in activities initiate by them or propose by them. All of these activities contribute to an holistic learning and cover all areas of development: intellectual, social and physical (Epstein, 2008).

In experiential learning, there is a great concern with educational intentionality. As Epstein points out (2007) "being intentional means acting with a purpose and a plan to achieve it. The intentionality of the acts arises from careful reflection, considering its potential effect" (p. 4). Intentionality then refers to how adults interact with children and how they establish authentic relationships based on shared thinking (Epstein, 2007).

One concern of educators is to build a learning environment that encourages the confidence, the autonomy and the initiative of children. There are five key ingredients to guide educators in this goal: i) the organization of spaces and materials, considering its abundance, age appropriateness and the possibility for having different uses. This point is related to the piagetian idea that learning takes place through the direct action of children with the materials (Piaget, 1983); ii) the active manipulation of objects, considering that when children has direct experiences with materials, they have the opportunity to explore, with all the senses, combining and transforming its initial use; iii) the choice, allowing the children to decide what they want to do, because the learning results from the attempts children make to defend their interests and follow their objectives; iv) the enhancement of communication language and the child's thinking. Children communicate their ideas, needs, feelings and discoveries through their emotions, facial expressions, sounds, gestures and words. Adults value and encourage these forms of expression, establish proximity and security relationships with children; v) the adult, as scaffold, recognizes and encourages the intentions, actions, interactions, communication, exploitation, problem solving and creativity of children (Lockhart, 2011).

Experiential learning allows children and adults to interact and participate in activities, sharing and learning as they work. It should also be noted that the intentional action of educators requires sustained knowledge about how children grow and develop. As Epstein (2007) states, educators should have in-depth

scientific, technical and pedagogical knowledge to enable them to know what kind of strategy they should use and when, considering the diversity of children and respect for their specificities when learning. According to the author, research has shown that children sometimes seem to learn better through child-guided experience, which means that they create meaning through their autonomous exploration of materials and their experiences and interactions with their peers. But in another type of learning, children seem to learn better when they are led by the adult-guided experience, that is, when adults introduce information, materials, and experiences.

Considering that learning does not result from the single effort of children nor from the direct instruction of the adult, the option between child-guided experiences and adult-guided experiences cannot be rigid. They must both be valued in the daily routine.

## **2. Methodological options**

The study presented here is part of a broader investigation, which took place from 2007 to 2011, and whose research focus was the praxiological transformation of a kindergarten institution, involving six educators and their groups of 25 children.

The transformation carried out over the course of four years has led to the development of an experiential approach that values the action and agency of the child. It used a qualitative methodological approach, focusing on the conceptions of the educators about the type of activities and projects that were developed in the kindergarten, at the final moment of the investigation.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on a script, and were used to assess the conceptions and practices developed at the institution.

The field notes in this study included the detailed, descriptive and focused records about all actors and also the researcher's reflective material on the progress of the project, the emerging ethical dilemmas, the methodological procedures, and the accomplishments.

The data was collected from the transcription of the semi-structured interviews and from the field notes. Because they were in written form, it was particularly important to apply a heuristic analysis to discover the reality underlying the productions collected (Bardin, 1995).

The initial step of the analysis was to build a system of categories, structured in themes, categories and indicators that were defined according to the objectives of the study. This study restricts the analysis to the pedagogical experience and curricular dimensions' theme, that integrates the categories: project, activities, planning, observation and evaluation. Based on the collected data, the type of learning and the role of the child and the educator were interpreted

## **3. Kindergarten Teachers' conceptions on experiential learning: presentation and data analysis**

In this section the conceptions expressed in the interviews and in the field notes, are described and interpreted.

According to the educators, in an experiential approach the projects and the activities emerge from the ideas of the children. In that process, it is guaranteed that all children have the capacity to express their concepts, plan their actions, develop them, interact with others, be supported and stimulated to reach more meaningful levels of meaning. This idea was expressed in a field note as follows:

*It became necessary to perceive the interests of the children, listening, and observing them, allowing them to formulate problems, guiding the research process, anticipating future paths and achievements. Through the experiential learning it is intended to increase the action for more complex experiences, fostering curiosity and the desire to know more.*

*We have sought to give relevance to the processes of learning: the ability to observe, the desire to experience, the curiosity to know, the attitude to criticize, and the satisfaction to discover and share with others their founding's.*

The project design is sustained in working collaboratively planned idea and extension of knowledge from emerging interests. This evidence is expressed in the following report:

*When we listen to children and value their expression, when they recognize us as mediators, everything changes! There is no longer the educator's project. It ceases to be my action to become our action. It ceases to be the action of the educator on the children to become the action of the group (E2Inês).*

The educators say that the projects based on the interests of children requires a different attitude, not always easy to achieve.

*Working on project, understanding the children's options, allowing them to expand their knowledge, cooperate with peers, and actively participate, requires me to be a different kindergarten teacher! It means that I am an element of the group that respects children and that they respect me. It means that we*

*establish our rules of life and functioning. Here, in the classroom, we have to manage carefully not to leave anyone out. This is a very complex process, but it gives me a lot of pleasure! (E2Maria).*

According to the educators, working in experiential based learning also implies a greater ability to manage the group and the different interests that are emerging. This idea was expressed in a field note of the researcher, from a commentary of a student.

*I never thought children had such a great creative power. They think, imagine things, make proposals and materialize them. I feel that we collaborate on their projects. There are so many things they want to know! Sometimes the kindergarten teacher has to make a priority agenda, to support so many different interests (NC4 - 10/11).*

The documentation of the child's work is valued. It helps the Kindergarten teachers to understand the progress of the project and the better strategy to support and challenge children.

*I try to document the whole process. I take photos, I analyze them, I try to write the children's comments. Often, when I analyze these data, I always see some paths that can be explored. This is where I write down the possible issues to challenge the children, and realize if we need to go somewhere or if I need a different book or material to expand their finding (E2Maria).*

The projects have several stages: involvement, questioning, exploration, experimentation, and evaluation, where the starting ideas are confronted with the knowledge built.

In the different classrooms, individual, pair or group projects were developed. Some of them were extended to almost the whole group. Parents were also an important partner for the development of projects, as expressed by the words of one Kindergarten teacher.

*Parents are very collaborative. Children ask them things for their projects and every day they bring books, do Internet research with their children and make themselves available to come and collaborate (E2 Maria).*

*Parents are involved in their children's projects. They support us a lot, bring materials to school, explain things to us. They have been an important help and the children love that (E2Lia).*

Some parents value this way of working and like to feel involved in it. A researcher's field notes captured this perception.

*The projects developed here are very rich and diversified. First they were discovering the city, the roundabout, the neighborhoods, the gardens, the houses... In another they wanted to know what the blind people felt and how they know the colours and can do things. Now, because of the world cup, they are discovering the flags of the countries. I think that's fantastic! I once asked my son why he was discovering those things and he told me - Because we want to learn and then Ines helps us! (...) I collaborate with them in what I can (NC20-09 / 10).*

The kindergarten teachers consider that the activities became more dynamic. According to teacher Sonia, the main reason behind this change was the understanding that children should have an active role in the definition and development of the activities.

*Now, children have a more active role than before. It is they that define their rights and duties, the maximum number of children in each area, the tasks the responsible should have, for example. Of course, there is an adult supporting them, alerting them to this or that aspect. It is them that decide what to do in the self-initiated work time and in the plan-do-review time, in which area they want to work, with whom, which materials to use, if they finish on the same day, if they continue the following days, ultimately, they decide. Even in the large and small groups time, they make decisions.*

*The plan is also based on the children, the observations we make, in their suggestions, their experiences, needs and interests (E2Sónia).*

The reorganization of space and of the daily routine were important to achieve the change. Kindergarten teachers understood that each moment of the day should have differentiated interactional dynamics.

*One of the things that resulted from the reorganization of space was more quality and quantity of materials and areas, which allowed increasing the amount of learning experiences (E2Sónia).*

*Children have now the opportunity to have different types of learning experiences. Since they work on different things, they have different times to explore and, since materials are diversified, they can do very different things (E2Lia).*

*When I think about the large group moments, I think always in things that allow sharing, the fruition, so that all children are active. The music, math or language games, symbolic games, are always good options. Children participate and get excited to work (E2Inês).*

It is also considered that activities are planned with educational intentionality.

*Now I think more on the diversification of activities. I think on the curricular areas, of course, but I think them with more integration and I know that I have to be intentional in what I do. I no longer think in*

*doing something just because it results well, but I question myself why I should suggest such activity (E2Inês).*

*What I think is that activities are now planned with other intentionality. I try to observe and listen to the child throughout the day and throughout the week. The suggestions I present in the small group time area generally born from what I saw (E2Maria).*

Kindergarten teachers reveal that the contact with the participative approaches has helped them find the intentionalities.

*Our work is supported by the HighScope model, in experiential learning, in a pedagogy-in-participation. We don't follow a rigorous referential, but there are elements that guide our pedagogical practice, in the organization of space, time and activity proposals. The understanding of this model allowed me to better define the educational intentionality (E2Sónia).*

According to the kindergarten teachers, activities were no longer planned with themselves as an end, but as a mean to help children to create and recreate their knowledge, experiment new materials, their possibilities and were adult support could waken them to new meanings.

*What fascinated me the most when I started working the small group time without establishing a rigid rule for the development of the work, was the rich and diverse productions of the children. Each child was having a different idea, a different way to use the materials. Children and fantastic creating! (E2Lia).*

One of the teachers refer that even her own way to look at the children creations changed.

*In the activities, we develop, perfection is no longer meaningful. Now I am much more interested in the processes children use to develop their work and the way they describe their options (E2Maria).*

According to the kindergarten teachers, the plan-do-review time brought a new understanding about the children's actions. Children were supported on their plans and developments. A field note of the researcher documents this idea.

*During the large group time (morning), teacher Maria read the story of the book 'O Rei Cota' (King Cota), with text by Margarida Castelo-Branco and drawings of Carla Antunes.*

*On the afternoon and during the autonomous work time, Zé Pedro planed to make the mask of the 'Homem-Monstro' (Monster-Man), character of the story:*

- *Maria, I want to make the mask of the Monster-Man! He opens the book and says:*
- *He is a boy, or is... isn't he a monster?!*

*Maria asks him:*

- *What materials do you want to use to build your mask?*
- *I don't know (looks to the cabinet). I want to make the mask with that (points to a sponge).*

*He goes get the sponge and says to Maria:*

- *Look, I hold and you draw, ok, Maria?*
- *Zé Pedro, don't you think it is a good idea if you draw it?*
- *I can't. It is too difficult!*
- *But can't you try?*

*- No. I know! (he gets up, goes to the house area and brings a pan). Now you can make a circle, see Maria?*

*Maria insists:*

- *But try to do it yourself. The work is yours, at least you have to try*
- *No, I need your help. Come on, draw me a circle...*

*Maria, with the help of the pan drew a circle, while Zé Pedro goes fetch a scissors.*

- *Zé Pedro, it is done. Is this how you wanted it?*
- *Yes. Now I'll cut it out. I also have scissors in my home. My mother teaches me.*

*He starts cutting and says:*

- *See? I know how to cut*

*He goes on cutting the circle and says:*

- *Look how I can do it.*

*Finishes cutting.*

- *Done!*

*- What about now? – Maria asks*

- *The eyes are missing.*
- *How do you want to make the eyes?*
- *I don't know.*

*He gets up and looks at the cabinet. Take the box with the bottles and caps out and says:*

*- I'll make the eyes with this.*

*He scrambles the caps, turns them... until a colleague tells him:*

*- Come on, choose!*

*- Shut up. I know which to choose – he answers.*

*He chooses the caps and asks Maria:*

*- And now, how do we glue them?*

*- You tell me, Zé Pedro?*

*- With glue!*

*- Yes, it is a good idea.*

*Zé Pedro goes back to the cabinet and fetches the glue. He cannot open it and tries with the mouth. A colleague asks him:*

*- You cannot open it?*

*He does not answer and gives the glue to the colleague. She tries to help him but she cannot open it, and advises him:*

*- Ask Maria for help.*

*Zé Pedro takes the glue from the colleague's hand and tries once again to open it. He succeeds and glues both caps in the mask. He returns the glue to the cabinet.*

*He returns to the table and says:*

*- It is missing this, that makes noise! (he points to the picture in the book)*

*The colleague says:*

*- It is a shower.*

*- Yes! Maria, we have to get a shower! Maria answers:*

*- But we don't have a shower here...*

*He answers:*

*- Yes we do. In the bathroom!*

*Maria explained to him that the showers that are in the school's bathroom are used to take a bath, if necessary, and suggests:*

*- Zé Pedro, what do you think of coming with me to the store room to see if you can find something that can be used? (They left to the store room).*

*Zé Pedro found a tube and brought it to the classroom. Back to the classroom, Maria asked:*

*- Zé Pedro, what size do you want the tube to have?*

*He holds the tube with both hands and says:*

*- Like this, look!*

*Maria cuts the tube with a X-ACTO knife.*

*Again, Zé Pedro goes for the glue and tries the glue the tube on the sponge.*

*He insists... he fails and says:*

*- Maria, I cannot do it! What now?*

*- Maybe with a wire we can hold the tube to the sponge. Let's try it, alright?*

*- Yes.*

*Maria cuts a little wire and manages to hold the tube. Meanwhile, Zé Pedro says:*

*- I still want to draw the kind.*

*- Done Zé Pedro! – Maria says.*

*- Now what?*

*- Uau, now it is finished (he puts the mask in front of his face).*

*For the remaining of the afternoon, Zé Pedro was going from area to area showing the mask to this colleagues (NC18-09/10)*

Kindergarten teachers mention that they support their planning in observing and listening to children.

*With this daily routine, I found time to observe and listen the children. When I learned to use the involvement scale, I became aware of the wonderful things children do. I always need to observe them. It was a task that became part of my daily routine. I will not be able to do a good job if I do not understand what children are doing and what interests them (E2 Maria).*

Planning the activities was also understood as a cooperative process between the kindergarten teacher and children.

*What I find interesting in this process is that we all have something to say. We all know that what we say is important for all. I try, sometimes unsuccessfully, to support all children's ideas. I try to include in the weekly plan every one's ideas. (E2Inês).*

The reflection about action is made daily. Children share with the colleagues the work they were developing. They explain the processes that were used and if they succeeded, or not, to finish what they intended.

*In the review time, children tell what they were doing. Colleagues make opinions and this sharing is interesting (E2Lia).*

The action evaluation process is performed in large group time at the end of the week. The kindergarten teachers reserve an hour on Fridays to assess the work that was developed. This moment is also used to discuss the progress of the projects and also the meeting between teachers that share ideas, actions, and the feeling of belonging to a community.

*On Fridays, when we assess the week, we also plan the following week. We think about the ongoing projects, the ideas we would like to explore, the materials that we did not yet explore. We write in this board the children's ideas, what we would like to do and we organize ourselves this way (E2Maria).*

The observation, listening, planning and the assessment are elements of a single process that allows thinking, organizing and reflecting about the educational action. These are the means that support the sharing, the collaboration and participation. Kindergarten teachers find spaces and time to observe, listen, and also to plan and assess with the group. They collect the elements about the children's plans and intentions, and define the support they can provide through the meetings and communication between them. In this process, the intentionalities of all the actors become clear. Children make decisions, are supported in their development, describe their actions, their way of thinking, the meanings they built and the way they belong to the group. Teachers document their actions, define the steps to follow and how they support the children, respecting their work.

Listening to the children's perceptions about the changes is fundamental to understand the change. Children that returned to the classroom managed to identify the aspects of change, confirming that listening to them is not only important, but necessary, to understand the depth of the educational context and their day-to-day experiences. These children understood that that was a place of well-being, where teaching and learning happen, where they play and talk, where they live as a group, accepting and obeying rules of social experience; a place of sharing and living.

They realized that changes were positive because they created more opportunities and they valued the children's actions.

In the interviews, children revealed that they know the characteristics of the context they experienced. They describe their interpretations about the context, analyse the role of the teacher, their own, and the way the educational action is developed. In the listening process, children describe their ideas revealing "a great competence to communicate about the day-to-day they live in" (Oliveira-Formosinho & Lino 2008, p.70).

## **Conclusions**

1. From the data emerges that kindergarten teachers recognize the creative potential of children, their intelligence and sensitivity. They accept that children are co-instructors of their learning and consider them active and competent participants in the development of experiences. They considered the children's rights, not only of provision and protection, but also of expression. Children are listened and encouraged to influence their own learning. Kindergarten teachers perceived a clear image of an active child (Barnes, 2000). They began to understand how the child learns in the interaction with the objects (Piaget, 1986), with the people, with the learning environment and with the culture, responding to social and cognitive stimuli (Bruner, 2000; Rogoff, 2005; Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2011).
2. Kindergarten teachers considered the intrinsic motivation of children and valued the way they develop their actions. Through experiential learning, children revealed their curiosity and their ability to share ideas and thoughts, using different languages and expression means.
3. Experiential based learning helps kindergarten teacher to reconstruct the image they had about the children. They started to see a competent child, with his choices, self-initiative, action-planning, and how they communicate them, develop them and reflect on their options, gathering the contribution of peers and adults.
4. From this study also emerges the image of a child who interacts with adults, who feels secure communicating their ideas and who is valued for discovering new things, being supported to reflect on them, reconstructing meanings in a shared way (Dewey, 2001).

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