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Games, play and equity: challenges of early childhood education in the age of standardization

Jogos, brincadeiras e equidade: desafios da educação infantil na era da padronização
Juegos, actividades lúdicas y equidad: desafíos de la educación infantil en la era de la estandarización

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Abstract:
This article addresses the role of games and play in early childhood education within a context of educational globalization marked by standardization and the measurement of results. It examines the tension between the discourse of school inclusion and actual institutional practices, asking how genuine inclusion can be ensured under neoliberal pressures. The general objective is to reflect on the challenges and contradictions of school inclusion in early childhood education, focusing on play as a pedagogical strategy. Specifically, the study analyzes the potential of games and play to promote meaningful learning and their role as instruments of social equity in schools. The research is qualitative and bibliographic, drawing on Brazilian authors who discuss educational governance, play-based practices and inclusion. The results indicate that play values the plurality of children's experiences, resisting the mechanistic logic of teaching and reinforcing children's right to play. Furthermore, play proves essential to effective inclusion when linked to concrete investment in infrastructure and teacher education. The article concludes that games and play are essential to inclusive, humanized and transformative early childhood education that effectively respects diversity and promotes social justice.

Keywords:
Early childhood education; Games and play; School inclusion; Inclusive education.

Resumo:
Este artigo aborda o papel dos jogos e brincadeiras na Educação Infantil em um contexto de globalização educacional marcado pela padronização e mensuração de resultados. Problematiza-se a tensão entre o discurso de inclusão escolar e as práticas efetivas nas instituições, questionando como garantir uma inclusão verdadeira diante das pressões neoliberais. O objetivo geral é refletir sobre os desafios e contradições da inclusão escolar na Educação Infantil, com foco na ludicidade como estratégia pedagógica. Como objetivos específicos, analisam-se o potencial dos jogos e brincadeiras para promover aprendizagens significativas e sua função como instrumento de equidade social no ambiente escolar. A pesquisa é qualitativa e bibliográfica, fundamentada em autores nacionais que discutem governança educacional, práticas lúdicas e inclusão. Os resultados indicam que o brincar valoriza a pluralidade das experiências infantis, resistindo à lógica mecanicista do ensino e reforçando o direito da criança ao brincar. Além disso, o brincar se mostra fundamental para a inclusão real quando vinculado a investimentos concretos em infraestrutura e formação docente. Conclui-se que os jogos e brincadeiras são essenciais para uma educação infantil inclusiva, humanizada e transformadora, que efetivamente respeite a diversidade e promova justiça social.

Palavras-chave:
Educação Infantil; Jogos e Brincadeiras; Inclusão Escolar; Educação Inclusiva.

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Resumen:
Este artículo aborda el papel de los juegos y las actividades lúdicas en la educación infantil en un contexto de globalización educativa marcado por la estandarización y la medición de resultados. Se problematiza la tensión entre el discurso de inclusión escolar y las prácticas efectivas en las instituciones, cuestionando cómo garantizar una inclusión verdadera ante las presiones neoliberales. El objetivo general es reflexionar sobre los desafíos y las contradicciones de la inclusión escolar en la educación infantil, con énfasis en la dimensión lúdica como estrategia pedagógica. Como objetivos específicos, se analizan el potencial de los juegos para promover aprendizajes significativos y su función como instrumento de equidad social en el entorno escolar. La investigación es cualitativa y bibliográfica, fundamentada en autores brasileños que discuten la gobernanza educativa, las prácticas lúdicas y la inclusión. Los resultados indican que el juego valora la pluralidad de las experiencias infantiles, resistiendo la lógica mecanicista de la enseñanza y reforzando el derecho de la infancia a jugar. Además, el juego resulta fundamental para la inclusión real cuando se vincula con inversiones concretas en infraestructura y formación docente. Se concluye que los juegos y las actividades lúdicas son esenciales para una educación infantil inclusiva, humanizada y transformadora que respete efectivamente la diversidad y promueva la justicia social.

Palabras clave:
Educación infantil; Juegos y actividades lúdicas; Inclusión escolar; Educación inclusiva.

1. Introduction and rationale

In recent years, education has become deeply intertwined with digital technologies, bringing changes that go beyond simply introducing new classroom resources. This transformation affects ways of teaching, learning and even relating to knowledge. In this environment, technological innovation ceases to be occasional and becomes part of everyday school life, requiring teachers to adopt different approaches. Mastering subject content is no longer enough; strategies, languages and pedagogical practices must be reconsidered. The traditional model, centered on transmission, shows signs of exhaustion in a connected and constantly changing society. Continuing education therefore gains prominence as essential support throughout this process of change. As Moran (2015) points out, the presence of technologies in education extends beyond using tools and involves broader transformations in the organization of teaching and the construction of knowledge.

We live in a time of increasing globalization, when education policies are influenced by international organizations that prioritize measurable results and standardized teaching. In this setting, school inclusion is permeated by contradictions: while the discourse of rights and equity gains strength, practices that reinforce inequality and exclusion intensify. Early childhood education, the first stage of basic education, is particularly affected by these dynamics because it concerns developing individuals whose needs cannot be reduced to metrics and rankings.

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Before addressing the implications of globalization for education, it is important to situate school inclusion within the Brazilian context and understand it as a process still under construction. Although significant legal advances guarantee everyone's right to education, translating these guidelines into everyday institutional life still faces several limitations. This distance between legal provisions and what actually happens in schools reveals that inclusion goes beyond access. In early childhood education, this discussion becomes even more sensitive. This stage involves experiences fundamental to children's development, requiring care to avoid practices that reduce diversity to homogeneous patterns of learning and development.

From this perspective, Mônica de Carvalho Magalhães Kassar emphasizes that consolidating an inclusive education system involves challenges extending beyond students' admission to school. The author notes that the main obstacles concern the concrete conditions of implementation, demonstrating the need to reorganize both pedagogical practices and institutional structures (KASSAR, 2011). This understanding broadens the debate and reinforces that inclusion, especially in early childhood education, requires more than occasional adaptations. Schools' operation, conceptions of teaching and ways of embracing differences must be reconsidered, recognizing that everyday school life involves tensions that must be confronted for inclusion to become effective.

Against this background, the following questions must be raised: how can genuine school inclusion be ensured in times of globalization, when discourses of equity are frequently appropriated by neoliberal approaches? What challenges do early childhood institutions face when attempting to reconcile global guidelines with children's concrete needs in diverse contexts? This article's general objective is to reflect on the challenges and contradictions of school inclusion in early childhood education under globalizing pressures. Its specific objectives are: (1) to analyze how games and play can contribute to more inclusive and meaningful pedagogical practice; and (2) to discuss the risks of school inclusion becoming meaningless when disconnected from schools' material and social conditions.

The choice of topic was not accidental. It is directly connected to my experience in education, particularly in early childhood education, where diversity is tangibly present in everyday classroom life. Throughout this journey, it was possible to observe, on different occasions, teachers' difficulties in balancing pedagogical proposals attentive to children's needs with institutional demands that often move toward standardization. This tension is not abstract: it appears in practices, decisions and even the limitations of teaching work.

Amid these experiences, the place of games and play in the educational process always attracted attention. These are not merely moments of relaxation, but powerful strategies for

participation, interaction and development. This becomes even clearer when observing children with specific needs, who often find more accessible ways of engaging in activities through play. These observations prompted an interest in better understanding how playfulness can contribute to more inclusive practices while revealing the tensions present in everyday school life.

Beyond personal experience, the topic is also relevant academically and socially. Within research, it engages with important discussions of inclusion in early childhood education, connecting pedagogical practices, equity and the effects of contemporary education policies. This is not an isolated debate, but an issue spanning different fields and still requiring further investigation.

From a social perspective, this discussion gains even greater significance. Considering playfulness as a structuring element of the educational process means recognizing each child's individuality, pace, forms of expression and ways of learning. In a setting marked by inequality, reflecting on inclusive practices in childhood also means discussing social justice. The aim is to ensure that all children have access to meaningful school experiences that respect their differences and expand their opportunities for participation and learning.

2. Methodology

The investigation presented in this article adopts a qualitative approach aimed at understanding the meanings and relationships involved in school inclusion in early childhood education. It therefore concerns interpreting educational phenomena through a closer reading of practices, discourses and challenges in everyday school life, rather than measuring data or working with numbers. This methodological choice allows subtler aspects of reality to be explored, particularly when the focus is on experiences, perceptions and diverse contexts that would be difficult to capture through more quantitative approaches.

Regarding procedures, the study consists of bibliographic research. It was developed through the analysis of academic publications, legislation and official documents addressing inclusive education, early childhood education and pedagogical practices. This approach brings together different theoretical perspectives and establishes a dialogue with authors who have already discussed the topic, broadening the understanding of the challenges and possibilities of inclusion in education. Lima and Mioto (2007) emphasize that bibliographic research is not limited to simply gathering ideas, but involves an analytical process that fosters new interpretations of the subject under investigation.

Source selection prioritized academically recognized materials, especially articles published in scientific journals, many available in databases such as SciELO, alongside regulatory documents guiding education policies in Brazil. These references strengthened the analysis by connecting theoretical foundations with critical reflections on school inclusion. The chosen methodology thus proved appropriate to the proposed objectives, enabling a deeper understanding of the tensions present in teaching and learning in inclusive contexts.

3. Theoretical framework

Games and play in early childhood education represent a powerful alternative to standardized teaching because they value the plurality of children's experiences. As provided by the National Curriculum Guidelines, these moments enable children to “construct and appropriate knowledge through their actions and interactions with peers and adults” (BRASIL, 1998, p. 9). Similarly, Kishimoto emphasizes that play experiences promote “meaningful learning, as they stimulate children's curiosity, autonomy and creativity” (KISHIMOTO, 2018). These pedagogical practices respect each child's pace, cultural context and interests, strengthening a curriculum adapted to children's individual characteristics rather than the reverse.

In a world where education increasingly relies on uniform methods and standardized tests, games and play become a means of resisting mechanistic teaching. Vygotsky notes that, through play, children internalize knowledge creatively and autonomously, in contrast to global instruments of control that reduce teaching to technical operations (VYGOTSKY, 1991 apud PIAGET, 1987). Valente (2021) further points out that when teachers participate in play-based workshops and observe positive effects, their professional autonomy and confidence to innovate are strengthened. In this sense, play challenges teaching driven by rankings and reports, allowing educators to reclaim their role as sensitive, creative mediators.

It must be emphasized that play is a child's right and an essential condition for promoting curricular justice and genuine school inclusion. The National Common Curricular Base recognizes children's right to “play daily in various ways... broadening and diversifying their access to cultural productions, their... social and relational knowledge” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 36). Guaranteeing the right to play strengthens comprehensive education in which all children, regardless of background, can express themselves, learn and grow. As Huizinga states, it “must have the character of freedom... it is a voluntary activity” (HUIZINGA, 1999, p. 15), ensuring that play truly serves as an instrument of inclusion and educational transformation.

Games and play are highly important ways of promoting inclusion because they respect and value children's cultural, physical, mental and emotional differences. According to Pedroso and Carvalho, “play among children promotes social involvement... through this activity, children learn to enact roles from adult life” (PEDROSO; CARVALHO, 2013). Furthermore, research focusing on children with disabilities indicates that play strengthens bonds between peers with and without special needs, contributing to more effective and inclusive pedagogical practice (a study in a public school in Pará). By promoting collective participation, play creates an environment that recognizes individual characteristics and supports a school culture that respects and celebrates diversity.

However, for play to function effectively as a mechanism of equity and inclusion, it is essential to move beyond “strategic inclusion,” which values curricular differentiation merely as a symbolic measure, and ensure concrete investment in infrastructure, teacher education and pedagogical materials. Silva and Souza show that in multicultural contexts, “by experiencing play practices originating in their communities, children feel represented and a sense of belonging to the school environment” (SILVA; SOUZA, 2020), reinforcing the need for spaces designed to embrace this plurality.

Guimarães and Almeida (2021) also note that scarce resources and excessive teaching workloads can make play-based proposals unfeasible, making it urgent to value educators as creators and mediators and recognize play as essential rather than supplementary (GUIMARÃES; ALMEIDA, 2021). Thus, the emancipatory potential of play is realized only when schools provide protected time, a welcoming environment and real conditions for everyone to play, learn and belong.

Expanding the use of games and play in early childhood education requires closer attention to the role of social interactions in learning. It is not simply about playing for its own sake. In inclusive contexts, play creates opportunities for encounters, brings children together, and encourages exchange and the construction of shared meanings. Through this movement, bonds form and collective participation grows. Many barriers in everyday school life are relational as well as pedagogical. Well-guided play practices help ease these difficulties. Dessen and Polonia (2007) emphasize that human development is directly linked to interactions experienced in different contexts, especially between family and school, reinforcing the importance of environments that embrace and value these relationships.

At the same time, a limited understanding of play as secondary within school routines must be avoided. When play is restricted to isolated moments, it loses part of its formative potential. To serve a truly pedagogical function, it must be included in planning, connected to

learning objectives and sustained by intentionality. This does not happen by chance. It requires organization and conscious choices by teachers. Kramer (2006) notes that practices continuously integrating play tend to encourage greater children's involvement and contribute to more meaningful experiences. In this sense, play ceases to be a break and becomes part of the learning process itself.

It must also be considered that strengthening inclusive play practices involves a broader change in how childhood is understood. Recognizing children as individuals who learn through playing, interacting and exploring the world means questioning rigid teaching models that engage little with these forms of expression. Valuing play in early childhood education opens space for schools more attentive to differences and more committed to equity. Games and play thus become more than teaching resources: they offer important paths toward more inclusive, sensitive pedagogical practices connected to children's realities.

4. Results and discussion

In Brazil, school inclusion is supported by official documents recognizing it as a fundamental right, particularly in early childhood education. The National Common Curricular Base offers important guidance by emphasizing pedagogical practices aimed at participation, equity and children's comprehensive development. It proposes learning rights that place children at the center of the process, valuing experiences such as living together, playing, participating, exploring, expressing themselves and knowing themselves (BRASIL, 2018). Beyond a formal guideline, this proposal points toward education that considers interactions and respects individual characteristics, seeking more meaningful experiences in everyday school life.

Despite these regulatory advances, institutional realities still reveal many challenges. Ensuring all children's effective participation and access to learning is not simple, particularly in contexts marked by social inequality and structural limitations. The child-centered education advocated by the BNCC does not always materialize as expected. In many cases, there is a mismatch between what documents prescribe and what actually happens in daily pedagogical practices.

Silva and Dias (2022) discuss this gap between legal guarantees and school realities when analyzing inclusion's path “from rights to practices.” The authors emphasize that despite progress in recognizing inclusion as a right, weaknesses remain in school organization, teacher education and working conditions. These factors hinder the implementation of inclusive

policies, often leaving inclusion more present in discourse than in the concrete reality of classrooms.

Building a genuinely inclusive school clearly requires more than laws and guidelines. It demands investment, changes in pedagogical practices and a lasting institutional commitment. Inclusion therefore cannot be regarded as something already completed, but as a process constantly under construction, dependent on effective action to confront the barriers still present in everyday education.

Pedagogical practices incorporating play have opened valuable opportunities to question traditional teaching models, especially in early childhood education. Repetitive, inflexible activities still predominate in many classrooms, limiting children's participation. In this setting, games and play offer alternatives that expand possibilities. This goes beyond making classes “lighter”: something deeper is involved. Play entails interaction, imagination and active participation, elements that help different ways of learning find a place in everyday school life.

Along these lines, Kishimoto (1998) emphasizes that games, toys and play should not be seen merely as pastimes. For the author, play occupies an important place in children's development because it connects cognitive, emotional and social dimensions. By exploring play situations, children experiment, create, test hypotheses and relate to others. When schools recognize this potential and integrate play into their planning, they expand learning conditions and begin considering the child as a whole.

This discussion also approaches Huizinga's (1999) perspective, which understands play as a cultural activity that is free and meaningful. The author highlights characteristics such as spontaneity, bounded time and space, and rules organizing participation. At the same time, play creates a kind of suspension of everyday life, allowing children to experience other ways of acting and expressing themselves. This cultural character reinforces the educational value of play, particularly when considering practices that encourage everyone's participation.

Play offers a possible path in response to standardized teaching. By valuing play, schools embrace different paces, interests and ways of learning, which is essential in contexts characterized by diversity. This involves recognizing that there is no single path to learning. Inclusion is also built through the capacity to make practices flexible and consider the experiences each child brings into the school environment.

Understanding children's development is an important starting point for questioning standardized pedagogical practices, especially in early childhood education. Piaget's (1975) contributions help explain that children do not learn passively. They construct knowledge

through action, interaction with their environment and the gradual elaboration of symbolic representations. This movement follows neither a single line nor the same pattern for everyone. Each child follows an individual path, influenced by experiences and developmental stage. Thinking about learning through a single model is therefore limited, as it ignores different paces, interests and ways of understanding the world.

This understanding engages with the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education. The document reinforces the importance of interactions and experiences in education, emphasizing that development occurs through children's relationships with other children, adults and the environment (BRASIL, 1998). Situations involving exploration, play and expression gain prominence in this context. By recognizing children as active individuals, the RCNEI points to the need for practices that consider their particularities and encourage meaningful learning.

The problem arises when teaching is organized around highly standardized proposals. When all children undergo the same activities, with the same expectations and within the same time, classroom diversity is disregarded. This is not always immediately apparent, but its effects emerge. Some children withdraw from activities, others show disinterest, and sometimes difficulties are interpreted as inability. Such situations can unintentionally generate exclusion within the school environment itself.

Considering early childhood education through Piaget's contributions and the RCNEI guidelines means recognizing the need for greater flexibility in pedagogical practices. Occasional content adjustments are insufficient. Teaching organization must be reviewed, creating conditions for different experiences to be welcomed and all children to participate effectively. Standardization reveals its limitations in this setting. The challenge becomes building pathways that respect the individuality of children's development and value multiple ways of learning.

The structural limits of school inclusion become more visible when observing everyday school life. It is not merely a question of pedagogical intention. Concrete difficulties affect daily work, including a lack of accessible materials, inadequate physical spaces and absent specialized support. Inclusion often depends almost exclusively on teachers' efforts as they manage diverse classes without the necessary support. This setting reveals a contradiction: inclusion discourse advances, but its realization still encounters obstacles hindering more equitable practices.

Teacher education also emerges as a sensitive issue in this process. In most cases, exposure to special education, curricular adaptations and inclusive methodologies during initial

training was limited. This is reflected in practice. Teachers often feel uncertain when planning strategies addressing classroom diversity. The problem concerns preparation and conditions rather than lack of interest. Guimarães and Almeida (2024) emphasize that effective inclusion depends on continuous investment in professional development, enabling teachers to respond more confidently and intentionally to everyday school demands.

Another noteworthy aspect is the risk of inclusion remaining merely discursive. In some contexts, enrolling students with specific needs is taken as a sign that inclusion is occurring. However, without suitable conditions, their presence does not necessarily translate into participation and learning. Guimarães and Almeida (2024) warn of this problem, indicating that valuing diversity requires real changes in teaching conditions. Otherwise, exclusionary practices risk being maintained beneath an inclusive appearance.

School inclusion therefore clearly cannot be sustained through guidelines or good intentions alone. Concrete investment, consistent public policies and changes in institutional organization are necessary. This entails improving infrastructure, expanding pedagogical resources and strengthening continuing education programs. Beyond guaranteeing access, conditions must be ensured for everyone to remain and learn. At this point, inclusion ceases to be merely an ideal and begins to approach reality.

5. Final considerations

The analysis based on texts and books shows that games and play in early childhood education cannot be reduced to supplementary or merely recreational activities. They occupy a central place in education, particularly when considering a more inclusive, meaningful approach attentive to the whole child. In contrast to standardization movements affecting education policies, play brings diversity, different learning paces and multiple ways of being a child back into focus.

In this setting, playfulness also takes on a character of resistance. This is not direct opposition, but a practice that insists on valuing listening, experience and children's active participation. Play is not a minor component of school routines; it affirms that childhood cannot fit rigid or homogeneous teaching models. Through this movement, more vibrant learning is strengthened, and children's agency ceases to be discourse and becomes part of everyday life.

Another central finding concerns the relationship between play and school equity. Play provides privileged spaces for coexistence and embracing differences, contributing to the social inclusion of all children, including those in vulnerable situations or with disabilities. However,

studies indicate that this potential is realized only with investment in infrastructure, continuous teacher education and recognition of educators as creative individuals and mediators. So-called “strategic inclusion” is insufficient when disconnected from effective public policies guaranteeing the right to quality, dignified play.

When incorporated into critical teaching, games and play can help change both society and teaching practices in schools. In times of globalization and educational systems controlled through metrics and rankings, restoring the centrality of concrete experience and everyday school life is urgent. School inclusion in early childhood education therefore cannot remain mere discourse: it must materialize in schools through practices respecting childhood in its essence and ensuring every child's right to play, learn and belong.

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