

When doing research with children means negotiating with adults: backstage of a survey of six-year-olds in schools

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Abstract *This paper aims to stir reflections on research with children by investigating aspects related to ethics, methods, play and contextualized activities. The possibility of recognizing adult authority as a mediator of interactive craftsmanship in the construction of the research environment also underlie the backstage and its craftsmanship. It builds on a survey of six-year-olds in schools that focused on the psychometric analysis of items in a test under construction. Returning to the memories of this environment, we discuss the importance of the leadership of children as research subjects. The foundation is anchored in the perspective of childhood sociology, discussing interactive craftsmanship. We conclude that it is possible to recognize this leadership in the engagement of negotiations with reference adults.*

Key words *Research, Children, Leadership, Childhood sociology*

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Introduction

Research is conducted to answer questions, make comparisons, report experiences, create or test tools, and more. It must be inserted in a relevant context or setting that justifies it and, in addition, research subjects play an essential role in the process. More than research subjects, it is urgent to reflect on the involvement of people in research. In this paper, we recall the place of children in research from the perspective of their participation, anchored in the concepts of childhood sociology. It starts from the need to reflect on the environment of research with children, where adults often assume speech on their behalf or they become subjects of an intervention that limits them to certain frames of responses, interaction and posture.

Moreira¹ points out the challenge of contributing with reflections on the craftsmanship of qualitative research with children and adolescents with chronic diseases as subjects. After reviewing international research with this audience, the author points out the contribution of the perspective of childhood and youth sociology in the field of pediatric care and in adolescence. In another paper, Moreira and Macedo² highlight the need to recognize the leadership of children as research subjects, which does not negate the presence of responsible adults, and the recognition of rights and their vulnerability, without ignoring risks and attention. Curtin³ also mentions the benefits of qualitative studies so that researchers learn about the world and perspectives of children including the personal meanings of events and actions, providing a better understanding of the phenomena studied.

In conceiving childhood as a social category and placing children and young people as citizens, history subjects that produce culture, they become a priority and their right to care and attention⁴ is recognized. Valuing the potential of qualitative research to strengthen this understanding, but starting from another experience, we provide a description that contextualizes the research environment that subsidizes the paper and gives rise to reflections.

Thus, we resume the backstage and conversations, which in the form of memories generate knowledge that qualifies the craftsmanship of research where children are the participants⁵. Some highlights may be considered in relation to processes of human research, and more specifically when it involves children. It is also a matter of thinking about scientific neutrality without

canceling out or paralyzing the research process, where children are participants.

The discussion centered on children and their leadership: reviewing the adult-centric model in research with children

When we consider children as social stakeholders⁶, we revive children's place in research, assigning them leadership and a status of legitimacy, adapting research methods and techniques. Mollo-Bouvier⁷ proposes that children be taken into account as social subjects that actively participate in the processes of sociability, as well as in the reproduction and transformation of society.

Children can be included in research so that their knowledge, experience and opinions can contribute to the results. As agents, they try to negotiate the characteristics of childhood through the adult-child relationship, coming into tension with adult understandings⁸.

The tension between considering children as passive subjects in the spaces of socialization and their recognition as agents of culture is reflected in the fact that *children were taken more as objects than as subjects of studies, [...] besides the inherent difficulties of research with this age group*⁹. This fact analyzed by the author has as a reflection in the perspective of development that considered children as incapable of seeing and describing their own world. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize the importance of considering them as participants in the investigations, especially in studies that work with the perspective of children, a rich source of data and that deserves to be better explored⁹.

Montandon⁶ argues that *children are and should be studied as actors in the construction of their social life and the lives of those around them*. Plaisance¹⁰ also stimulates research that seeks to apprehend the group of children as social stakeholders, through their effective practices, their experiences and their representations.

Corsaro¹¹ retaken by Delgado and Müller¹² also advocated studies *with* and not *on* children. The concept of socialization in childhood sociology promotes the understanding of children as stakeholders capable of creating and modifying cultures while inserted in the adult world. If children interact in the adult world because they negotiate, share and create cultures, we need to think about methodologies that really focus on their voices, lenses, experiences and viewpoints, which requires a certain abandonment of their focus centered on adult or adult-centric viewpoint¹².

Children as subjects of research lead us to review and adapt methodologies. This aspect is addressed by Sirota¹³, who finalizes her paper on the emergence of childhood sociology bringing the questioning, among others, on which methodologies to build on to reach children's experiences and manage them.

Delgado and Müller¹² point out three difficulties to be overcome in research with children related to adult-centric rationale focused on the field and ethics. As Graue and Walsh¹⁴ point out:

[...] finding out intellectually, physically and emotionally is difficult when it comes to children, because the physical, social, cognitive, and political distance between the adult and the child makes this relationship very different from that among adults. [...] it is much easier to construct a series of arguments of how children are by appealing to the authority of adults or the fields of knowledge that have been directed to universal laws, excluding the studies on children in their contexts.

Again, on this aspect, the three major impediments to incorporating children as research participants are: 1) researchers assume that children are less competent; 2) inequality in power relations in the adult-child relationship considering adults as authority; and 3) communication gaps between children and adults³.

Regarding the period of childhood and distribution into age groups, each age, time, place and activity of children creates specific institutions set in the intentional realm of a socialization that occurs according to a ritualized institutional course and that obeys a double series of requirements; social demands that adjust children's lives according to adults and work needs⁷. Sirota¹³ sets as challenges of statistical analysis that contribute to childhood sociology to make children emerge from their statistical invisibility, showing them as such and not through intermediaries of other categories. The author affirms that this problem lies at two levels – the construction of statistical bases and the treatment of the variable.

In the light of the above, it is possible to highlight such literature as a relevant theoretical-conceptual basis for researchers anchored who, anchored in qualitative research, seek to recover in the radicality, the notions of children and youth leadership, the voicing capacities of the audience's experiences, adapting techniques and methods, without ignoring their age differences.

Returning to the memory of a research: a posteriori reflection

The research that subsidizes this essay was approved by the Research Ethics Committee. The Consent Form for children was not required or requested. Only the Consent Form of parents or responsible authorizing their own participation and that of their children considering their age group was applied. Teachers were also requested to respond to a questionnaire on students, in case of agreement, through the Informed Consent Form of teachers.

We emphasize here that this paper did not aim to return to these original data but to search in the field memory of the first author of this work's elements that usually go unnoticed in quantitative analyses, and which were lacking in the results of this research. Faced with the perspective of making the child emerge, in addition to the statistical data that the study⁵ provided, we later constructed a backstage report of a research with children. The return to this backstage can stimulate learning and reflections on the field of children's research.

That is, accessing the memory of a field that articulated interaction with reference adults – parents and teachers, seeking their authorizations – and did not dispense with an approach to children, facilitated our *a posteriori* return, here in this paper, to this discussion about children leadership in research where they are the main participants. The question is: to what extent does being part of the research as a subject mean to actively participate in this process, being listened to in its desires and limits, refusals and questionings?

Its methodological design considered 85 six-year-olds who participated in the research that aimed to operationalize a test of motor coordination in development with an analysis of its items, with the objective of evaluating test-retest reliability and investigating whether motor performance is influenced by gender, school type and place of residence.

The collection took place in public and private schools of a capital and inland region of the state of Minas Gerais, and evaluations of children with typical development were chosen randomly. In addition, questionnaires on their performance in daily activities and at school were answered

by parents and teachers. The evaluation items included activities in children-related contexts, such as basting, writing, drawing, fitting, hopscotch, ball activities, balancing on one foot, nesting pins, among others⁵.

In this study, collections were carried out at the children's school and during school hours, split into two days for each child and performed at times previously agreed and authorized by the administration and teachers so as not to interfere so much in academic activities, avoiding to compromise them in a way that would harm children and school routine. All this collection process occurred according to resolutions that govern human research and here we can highlight situations about the research with children and the authorization of those responsible versus children's interest in participating or not in the study.

We emphasize that, according to the Consent Form, no one would be obliged to participate and could leave at any time. Although the Term of Assent was not necessary at this age, all children were briefed about the process in a clear language and could still ask questions. Listening to them and recognizing them as active subjects was essential at this stage. The activities, materials used, the need to time and follow the steps of the activity, the training period and the effective counting were clearly explained.

Although the legal codes transfer to the family the decision on whether children can or cannot participate in research, in addition to the consent of parents or legal representatives, children's assent is important⁹. In this research experiment, this attempt was made as an informal process, while not requested by the Ethics Committee.

All parents, teachers and children were informed that they would not have direct benefits, but that they would be contributing to the construction of an assessment of motor coordination for children. The interesting thing was to hear from some children that they understood that it was as if they helped others who could not make certain jokes like them and that it was something serious. In addition, it shows that children's knowledge should not be overlooked. One of the children sought to know better and more thoroughly about what it was, and when she was told that it was a master's research, she explained what she thought of the research and added that she knew what it was, since her aunt also did masters. Clarifying issues enabled us to see how trust was established and children could give an opinion about the process.

Interaction craftsmanship and its learning: limits and challenges when researching with children, including negotiations

In order to access children, we opted for contact through schools, a process that leads to the survey of networks and search for alternatives to publicize the project. This included meetings with the administration and/or pedagogical supervision after telephone contact, face-to-face and/or via e-mail. This was not an easy process, we had schools that did not reply or that authorized, but at the time of collection, was not made possible due to a probable change of administration or another research in progress. However, we must highlight the good reception and respect for research by those who returned after initial contact. In total, twelve schools were part of this process.

In the establishment of this network of contacts, accepting or refusing to participate in the research, favoring access to children was often not something that meant only safeguarding them. However, it included questioning changes in already established routines, reflecting on how much this might compromise and require other resources to receive a researcher who was not part of that space. It is, therefore, necessary, during the construction of access to the field and negotiations, to obtain acceptance, to ask what makes the target audience of research to agree with the participation: availability, exchanges, scientific contribution, partnerships or recognition? These are aspects to be considered that traversed somehow contacts made and contributed to the institutional agreement, such acceptances that, even indirectly, since they are not always verbalized, refer to possible interests, exchanges, opportunities and/or partnerships when they have been signed.

In addition, since it was an evaluation, many inquired about what it would be like to return to parents and school, which was readily explained since it was an evaluation under construction and did not have specific scores to define a diagnosis or final opinion. A proposal was made to submit a report, an explanatory material on the difficulties of motor coordination and contact available, as well as the assurance of referral to care services, if necessary. This process would not be an obstacle since they were subjects represented by children of typical development based on a previous questionnaire about the children answered by the parents or guardians and by the established inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The reports sent at the end of collections followed a traffic light analogy, considering the red color for alert and recommendation of professional evaluation; yellow meant paying more attention to the performance of children in the daily activities; and green was adopted when no disturbing signs were identified in the performance of the activities performed. This result was elaborated based on the analysis of the tests performed, considering clinical signs and the context observed during the collection, and on whether or not to seek more information to better investigate and/or seek care. This agreement as a form of return of the research's results allowed a response that was well accepted by the schools invited to collaborate and that received a synthesis report on the participating students. That was a strategy used, but does it also trigger a reflection on what another kind of feedback can be given to the collaborators participating in the research?

Lisboa and Habigzang¹⁵ cited by Moreira¹ emphasize that *research should not be reduced, in relation with the participating subjects, to a data collection achievement*. When addressing the issue of children and adolescents in situations of violence, they state that researchers must be willing to follow and intervene with children and families and indicate that the feedback of research is not restricted to delivering a report, but rather building spaces for interaction that promote reflection and implement change.

The commitment to return data requires researchers and their team to discuss the nature of reports, its drafting and information dissemination methods⁴. Moreover, feedback can become more delicate when it comes to institutions and policies.

One facilitating aspect of the contact in the schools was through a mediator who knew the researchers or who had already done research in the place. A seminar entitled "Children with motor coordination problems: Challenges in the classroom" was also held and culminated in a list of teachers and schools interested in participating in future and ongoing research on the subject. A meeting was organized for those responsible, but schools eventually chose to let the study participants get in touch individually if they wished.

As a result, schools' collaboration became more effective, and because they had more children enrolled, only one public school in each city was required. Private schools demanded more contact and more search, few parents and/or responsible responded, totaling ten private

schools. The envelopes were gradually distributed randomly by draw, ensuring analysis and control of the time of response to parents' questionnaires and evaluation of children. Only those who obtained authorization through the return of envelopes with completed questionnaires and informed consent forms authorized for children and teachers to contribute to the study participated in the research. Few envelopes returned from private schools and therefore, more private schools were recruited. Therefore, it is worth highlighting the importance of professional networks that have given some authority to support research and the relevance of the seminar to the exchange of information among stakeholders.

This process involves implicit and explicit exchanges for collaboration and entry into the place that is part of the routine of the other. Delgado and Müller¹² point out that *entering other people's lives is to become an intruder, it is necessary to obtain permission, which goes beyond what is given under forms of consent, and this is rarely done with children*.

Moreira¹ talks about interactive craftsmanship in the case of research when subjects are children, including considering that, in addition to all the differences that underlie scientific authority of knowledge in the figure of the researcher, they also speak of the differences of class, gender and age group, *adults interacting with children, where the latter are the center-stage of the research*.

By involving children as participants in the research, researchers are challenged to examine their own beliefs about children's competencies; to define a different adult-child relationship that minimizes power; and to learn communication styles in order to obtain their perspectives and develop a common language³. In addition, researchers must use research techniques that do not rely solely on verbal language.

Respecting children's leadership in research and understanding them as subjects goes much further, is about being surprised by their attitudes, respecting their language and their symbols and even their size (stature). Study assessments were made on children's tables and chairs. And that makes a difference that is not only ergonomic but also allows to establish a dialogue and to show attention to who is being listened and spoken to.

Researchers must recognize children as experts in their own lives and be open to the idea that they may have skills that adults may not be aware of³. If the child has difficulty answering a question, this does not automatically mean that

they are incompetent; instead, researchers should examine the situation, including context, age, and especially their own role (for example, reflecting on how questions are drafted), as per the author's suggestion.

As for the process of authorization to participate in the research, I recall two situations: a single child who received parental consent, but who did not agree to participate, and the many children who wanted to participate and consent was not obtained or envelopes were not returned. Regarding the former situation, due to the teacher's unforeseen impediment, who had been absent on the day scheduled for evaluation, but authorized by the substitute teacher (informed about the activity), the child asked only to see the room and the materials. Later, he justified that he had found everything very interesting, but since his teacher had not commented on this activity, he preferred not to perform it. That decision was respected. A child's refusal to provide consent to participate in the research must always be respected⁹.

Later, the teacher was surprised by the non-acceptance and after contextualizing, she offered to clarify and organize a new day, but I chose to consider the initial decision of the child and respect the ethical aspects of the process. Yes, it was one less private school child for the quantitative study that is sample-dependent, but it was more of an active subject of the collection process who did not feel safe to participate even when authorized by those in charge. On the other hand, the second situation was more complicated. Having children begging for participation, but not being allowed by their guardians to participate. How could we respect this interest of the child who even begged to participate in receiving me? How could we make this process ethical? This study culminated in reflections on this matter. It is not about making some jokes and pretending to participate: it was not authorized. In addition, children pointed out to me, showed me and even introduced me to those who were going to pick them up at the end or beginning of classes. I have had positive returns from both children and those responsible for being shown as "the girl who played with me" by some children. Some mothers, or even children, told me about their interest in playing games, telling their siblings and colleagues. Some days later, when I arrived at school, I was welcomed by a group that surrounded me hugging me and asking me about the day I would take them to play, and those who had already participated asking when they would be called again.

This children's reference to playing is their structuring language in their relationships with the world¹⁶; it emphasizes their power of inclusion and stimulus that characterizes their participation. That is, we emphasize the power of play that even in the face of an evaluation that follows norms to create tests for classification, categorization, controlled environment, also referred to play by children and provided them with "a voice". This expression may sound strange since we do not give a voice, people have a voice, but in the face of research using tests with rules and a manual, we could have followed the path of silence, of standard and complete formality. On the contrary, the choice was made in the context of interaction that neither compromised nor influenced the results.

As already mentioned, this evaluation involved activities that were part of or could be contextualized in the games played by children. Here we can point to play and intrinsic motivation in the midst of test standards such as timing, posture and body position, but it is worth noting that the evaluation respected activities that referred to play or daily activities based on the feedback received from children, parents and teachers.

According to Horstman et al.¹⁷ cited by Moreira¹, assuming that children and adolescents have a unique viewpoint about what affects them in life leads to seek participatory methods of research, for example drawing and writing the story, and in this experience of writing a paper, activating the backstage of the construction of research, allowing activities to be contextualized. In addition, when considering health and disease, authors quote that these techniques are important to understanding how they interpret their illness and how they communicate this experience considering that children's language traverses the playful realm.

Regarding evaluation, test or some other name that has similar meaning, it is not enough to define something about the evaluated person, to take as truth. Applying a test is only part of a more comprehensive assessment process, which can enable a common language, set treatment goals, detect something, document advances in care, provided that all context and relevant aspects of the process are considered.

We need to start from the fact that we are faced with a child and that it is important to consider its potentialities amid the limitations that emerge, initially and more easily, reported in the assessment process in care. Applying some test,

examining and evaluating requires training to prevent the results from being analyzed erroneously. It also requires sensitivity to know what to evaluate, how to evaluate and whether to evaluate. It can be one of the ways to find out who is seeking attention.

In addition, when working with children, it might be helpful for the researcher to be aware of the development process and that this varies with experience, being open to the idea that children may be able to understand more than has been stated in previous research and development theories³.

The controlled aspect of the research did not allow to silence and negate the child and the researcher. On the contrary, it was possible to collect dreams, desires and ideas; to respect limits by breaking down the assessment into different days; to consider the appropriate location; to schedule the best time; to lose subjects because of lack or scheduling of school activity. The study and its methods allowed us to see children as subjects of their actions and interests, minimizing the adult-centric vision necessary for the test's standards, but also showed that children recognize the authority of the adult who must authorize participation or who becomes important for something that is meaningful to a child.

To make this clearer, I highlight an episode in which a child told me that he wanted to be a firefighter when he grew up. Such was his surprise and contentment when I said that I had a firefighter friend. Motivation increased further, as if I climbed up a level, since I knew a fireman and he was still my friend.

Another episode was of a child who asked me what the time was three times, realizing that the test could be tiring for him and that the question might be a sign of interruption of collection; the second time around, I asked him the reason for his asking this question and if he wanted to stop. He said it was nothing and he wanted to continue. All proceeded naturally, but when time was asked for the third time around, I answered it, and then he asked how much time was left for four o'clock.

From that moment on, I made it even clearer that he could stop if he wanted to. He asked me whether I would feel upset if he returned to the room. I still did not know what that meant but I said no, confirming what I had already indicated earlier that he was free to decide to stop whenever he wanted. In a sign of relief, he explained to me that he wanted to play, but that at four o'clock he wanted to go back to the classroom to sing one of

his classmates a happy birthday. The request was accepted. Attention to children's signs and the authority they see us with cannot go unnoticed in order to respect the ethical aspects of research involving children.

Curtin³ points out this situation of authority as a challenge and suggests developing a relationship and clarifying a role (e.g. setting rules for interaction) that diminish the power differences between the researcher and children and convey the researcher's desire to learn. The researcher must show to the children the importance of listening to their perspectives and employ specific strategies to reduce authoritative and judgmental conduct or that affects behavior. At the same time, establishing a different kind of relationship can sometimes be difficult for researchers because children often react with perplexity and then test the boundaries of the relationship. They can perceive a non-directive and non-authoritarian adult-child relationship if this is a new experience for them³.

Regarding ethical aspects, the same author emphasizes that children must be explained in words that they can understand and clarify with whom information will be shared. In addition, children also need to know that they have the right to drop out and that the decision not to participate will be respected, as they can stop at any moment without consequences.

This study involved six-year-olds, but also brings reflections on the research process with babies. Would signs of withdrawal and approximation be necessary to respect their leadership? Do all research subjects voluntarily authorize their participation when someone answers for them? It is worth reflecting, also, on the research process with infants or other subjects who cannot respond by themselves.

Barbosa and Fochi¹⁸ also point out the need to think about this specificity in the face of research challenges with young children and infants, since they do not speak, but say, call, announce and denounce. They point out that changing the babies' and small children's image make it possible to *forge a science not from simplification, but from complexification*. Unlike the traditional way of searching, they wish to ensure the voice of young children and babies, *to relate attentively, perceiving them as an Other, neither inferior nor superior, a different Other, which also has its history, its particular way of understanding the world and its way of experiencing the place it occupies*¹⁸.

Horstman et al.¹⁷ resumed by Moreira¹ address producing an environment where children

do not feel constrained by making adult power and adult authority over the child a relative one. This traverses a friendly posture, presentation, telling the child a small professional story, conveying safety and favoring the research encounter. They cite cases in which children ask personal questions to the interviewer, which does not need to be seen as bias but as part of building trust and a safe approach environment, avoiding the idea that it is tested.

This process includes the challenge of using forms of communication in different styles and the researcher needs to look for the meaning conveyed in short sentences, learn the child's vocabulary, be careful not to use judgmental sentences, be creative and playful, adapt and use a variety of non-verbal techniques, try not to use large words and/or complex language, allowing children enough time to respond and ask questions³.

As for the location of data collection, some schools provided a suitable place for the research and others had to be adapted in the way that was possible. Evaluation children losses also occurred due to children's absence, hindering assessment on close days or through school routine and celebrations. Raising children's perspectives requires a quiet, private, and neutral place, where children feel comfortable and free to talk; child-size chairs must be available so that the researcher can stay on the same level as children³.

Another issue concerns anonymity, and Kramer⁴ mentions the experience of contexts in which, given the great involvement and integration between researcher and children, they decided to ask them to choose a fictitious name that they wanted to appear in the official version of works. This option enables to value children's leadership and choice in the research.

Regarding this leadership, the researcher must negotiate with the child what information obtained in the study can be disseminated, just as ethical concern should not be present only in the elaboration of the project, but must permeate research and dissemination of results⁹. In this aspect, coordination and processes related to the moment prior to data collection can be included.

In research, it is necessary to reflect on the study fulfilling a social role and not personal utility. One must also consider political aspects involved and the provision of services that may influence the acceptance or not of participation in research. Does research ensure the choice to participate to all subjects in the way it has been conducted?

Figure 1 summarizes and reinforces the relationship of the aspects discussed in this backstage.

"Entering" the child's world requires sensitive stimuli, surprising and being surprised, answering their questions and using words from their context to value it. Children provide clues to good observers on how they can be respected in the research process. This was the backstage of a quantitative research, whose results and objectives achieved did not report the whole process and therefore the desire to write them. This essay does not pretend to be a model nor to propose methods and formulas to answer all the questions asked, but it emphasizes the importance of considering children's leadership in the research process, besides stimulating the reflection on research involving children.

What else can be done? What other experiences have other researchers had? Does allowing children's, and even the researcher's leadership influence, diminish or interfere with the neutrality of the study? Would it not be possible to reconcile everything and "give a voice", create a pleasant environment, learn from the process and still achieve results that respond and continue to suggest future research?

Conclusion

Research involving children is a complex area that demands subtlety and includes the construction of spaces of children's leadership and methodological and ethical issues. We hope that discussions shown here may stimulate actions,

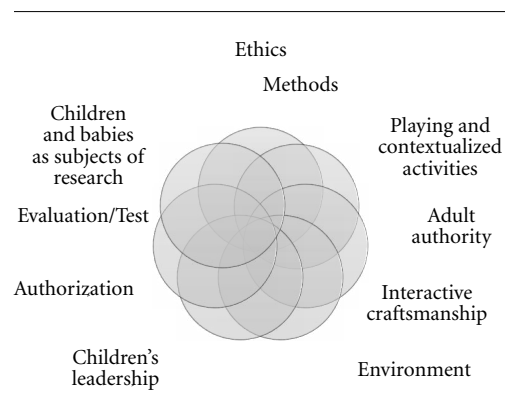


Figure 1. Synthesis of the aspects discussed.

reflections and other debates among researchers who carry out studies on children.

Returning to the question previously proposed – to what extent being part of the research as a subject means to actively participate in this process, be listened to in own desires and limits, refusals and questionings? We need to point out that doing research with children means negotiating with the adult world. This world includes institutions, regulations, legal limits, but also a game of interests and powers. Doing research with children means increasing the number of stakeholders that must be accessed in the process. This is because, even if six-year-olds were the main participants in the research that promote the reflections listed here, the fact is that doing research with children means rather knowing how to negotiate with reference adults.

This backstage of the quantitative study whose objectives addressed aspects related to the psychometric analysis of evaluation items under

development focus on the interactive craftsmanship of children research and we emphasize the need to consider this craftsmanship, adaptation of methods and techniques so that children are not treated as the object of studies in the face of challenges and technical and scientific demands.

Above all, we declare the importance that research may reveal its backstage, betting on the opening of the black box of the processes of access to the universe of study, which includes relationships between spaces and people. Even research with a statistical design (here psychometric) do not dispense with interactions, and we can affirm that if a questionnaire is admittedly a structured tool with rules, manuals and frameworks for application, in our case, since it is a test, it must be preceded of an established rapport, of a suitable approach to who will be the core participants, namely, children.

Hence, it makes sense to evoke the playful language and value refusals and questionings.

Collaborations

S Agostini and MCN Moreira worked together on the conception, writing of the text and its final version.

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