

ARTICLE

## THE CONTENT-FORM UNITY IN *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PLAY*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the results of a conceptual study addressing the social content of preschool play, with a focus on the relationship between the form and content of playful activity in Elkonin's Psychology of Play (2019). Grounded in the premise that play constitutes an activity through which social relations are reconstituted via playful action, and noting that contemporary cultural-historical studies in Brazil have often treated the content of children's roleplay as a secondary dimension, this theoretical investigation examined Elkonin's approach to the problem of play content and its relationship with playful form. The analysis was organized around four axes: (i) the historical context and societal project; (ii) the method for understanding reality; (iii) the conception of human development (individual–society relationship); and (iv) pedagogical principles and action. We found that the dimensions of content and form are conceived as a dialectical unity in play, and such principle permeates Elkonin's work, placing the play's social content at the center of his general theory of play—an insight with significant implications for both scientific research and educational practice in schools.

**Keywords:** unit of content and form, play of roles, Psychology of Play, Elkonin, historical-cultural psychology.

## A UNIDADE CONTEÚDO-FORMA NA PSICOLOGIA DO JOGO

**RESUMO:** O artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa teórico-bibliográfica que se debruçou sobre o problema do conteúdo social da brincadeira pré-escolar, focalizando as relações entre forma e conteúdo da atividade lúdica protagonizada na obra máxima de Elkonin, *Psicologia do jogo* (2019). Partindo da constatação de que pesquisas contemporâneas brasileiras que assumem a perspectiva histórico-cultural têm tematizado apenas secundariamente a dimensão do conteúdo dos papéis sociais protagonizados pelas crianças, e tendo em vista a premissa de que o jogo protagonizado é atividade que proporciona a

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reconstituição de relações sociais pelo mecanismo da ação lúdica, o estudo investigou o tratamento dado pelo autor à problemática do conteúdo da brincadeira e sua relação com a forma lúdica. A análise da obra foi estruturada com base em quatro eixos: i) contexto histórico e projeto de sociedade; ii) método de conhecimento da realidade; iii) concepção de formação humana (relação indivíduo-sociedade); e iv) práxis pedagógica. Foi possível identificar que as dimensões da forma e do conteúdo da brincadeira são concebidas como unidade dialética, e que o princípio da unidade conteúdo-forma atravessa integralmente a obra analisada, trazendo centralidade ao conteúdo na teoria geral do jogo de Elkonin, fato que tem importantes implicações para a pesquisa científica e para o trabalho educativo escolar.

**Palavras-chave:** unidade conteúdo-forma, brincadeira de papéis, *Psicología del juego*, Elkonin, psicología histórico-cultural.

## LA UNIDAD CONTENIDO-FORMA EN LA PSICOLOGÍA DEL JUEGO

**RESUMEN:** El artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación teórico-bibliográfica que se enfocó en el problema del contenido social del juego preescolar, centrándose en las relaciones entre la forma y el contenido de la actividad lúdica protagonizada en la obra máxima de Elkonin, “*Psicología del Juego*” (2019). Partiendo de la constatación de que las investigaciones contemporáneas en Brasil, que asumen la perspectiva histórico-cultural, han tematizado solo de manera secundaria la dimensión del contenido de los roles sociales protagonizados por los niños, y teniendo en cuenta la premisa de que el juego protagonizado es una actividad que permite la reconstrucción de las relaciones sociales mediante el mecanismo de la acción lúdica, el estudio investigó el tratamiento que el autor dio al problema del contenido del juego y su relación con la forma lúdica. El análisis de la obra se estructuró alrededor de cuatro ejes: i) contexto histórico y proyecto de sociedad; ii) método de conocimiento de la realidad; iii) concepción de formación humana (relación individuo-sociedad); y iv) praxis pedagógica. Fue posible identificar que las dimensiones de la forma y el contenido del juego se conciben como una unidad dialéctica, y que el principio de la unidad contenido-forma cruza integralmente la obra analizada, otorgando centralidad al contenido en la teoría general del juego de Elkonin, hecho que tiene importantes implicaciones para la investigación científica y la labor educativa escolar.

**Palabras clave:** unidad contenido-forma, juego de roles, *Psicología del Juego*, Elkonin, psicología histórico-cultural.

## INTRODUCTION

Scientific research on children's play expanded significantly throughout the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, recording attempts to understand it from different conceptions of human beings and development. The work of the Russian psychologist and researcher Daniil B. Elkonin stands out in this field for his effort to elaborate a general theory of play that could scientifically clarify its nature and specificity, as well as its formative process. Addressing theoretical and methodological gaps and inconsistencies that mark the literature on play, the book *Psychology of Play* (Elkonin, 2019) represents a synthesis of his investigative work over nearly five decades, encompassing historical, bibliographic, and experimental studies of the internal structure of role play, understanding it not as just any child activity, but as the guiding activity<sup>2</sup> of the preschool period – the developmental age which, in contemporary society, extends approximately from 3 to 6 years old.

<sup>2</sup> For Leontiev (2017), guiding activity is the social activity that promotes development, as it is the one that engenders the most decisive changes in each period, promoting the development of psychic processes and consciousness.

Published in 1978 and translated into Portuguese<sup>3</sup> in 1998, the book *Psychology of Play* — which has therefore already marked 25 years since its publication in Brazil — has become widely disseminated among researchers dedicated to the study of play within cultural-historical tradition. The importance of this work is closely linked to the fact that Elkonin (2019) made significant progress in examining the elements that explain play from a wholeness approach, grasping its historical-social origins, revealing its formative process in ontogenesis, and identifying in the role enacted by children the minimal unit of analysis of role-playing.

Elkonin (2019) posits that it is through the assimilation of societal rules of conduct — corresponding to the system of social roles — that young children can apprehend the norms, meanings, and motives underlying adults' labour and social relations. Therefore, he argues that the fundamental content of play is not "the man-object relationship, but the man-man relationship" (p. 34). From this perspective, the quality of the relationships that the child take part of plays a decisive role in their development, expressed both in the themes of play — that is, the spheres of social reality that are reconstructed in play — and in its specific content, that is, the central aspect of adult life dynamics that reveals what children apprehend and internalize from lived reality (Magalhães & Mesquita, 2014):

Children's play may follow the same theme yet differ completely in its internal content. In the role of the aviator, one may emphasize above all the aspects that characterize the relations with the mechanic or with the copilot as relations of subordination; but one may also highlight his careful attitude toward the control panel, his concern for the passengers, and his comradely relations with the other members of the crew" (Elkonin, 1987, p. 101, our translation, our emphasis)

Play is, therefore, directly connected to the child's ethical and moral formation, and insofar as it mobilizes psychic processes as a whole, raising children's consciousness to more complex levels, it decisively influences personality formation (Elkonin, 1987). Consequently, the need for the psychological study of play lies not only in unveiling its nature and importance for development, but also in enabling the educational guidance of this special form of activity (Elkonin, 1987).

The theses advanced by Elkonin have, in general, been confirmed by current research, which, in addition to reaffirming the overall character of his theory, have contributed to broadening the theoretical understanding of the topic. Alongside publications offering bibliographic reviews (Lazaretti, 2011; Lima & Costa, 2020; Marcolino, Barros & Mello, 2014), a number of studies conducted in Brazil aim to deepen the structural understanding of role play in relation to the development of higher psychological functions (Correia & Meira, 2008; Szymanski & Colussi, 2020), as well as to explore the pedagogical implications for early childhood education (Brigatto, 2018; Marcolino, 2013).

These studies reaffirm that the fundamental content of preschool play consists of social relations (Elkonin, 2019). In this regard, while they confirm the proposition that psychological functions develop in complexity only through the set of human activities in the world, they also demonstrate that education is a necessary condition for play to reach more advanced forms. We note, however, that although these works begin from the premise that play, in its most developed form, is structured as an activity through which the child reconstructs — in an abbreviated and synthesized manner — social relations by incorporating the motives and meanings underlying human modes of action, they appear to

<sup>3</sup> According to Lazaretti (2011), the work was published in 1978, translated into Spanish in 1980, published and translated from Spanish into Portuguese in 1998. In English, we find the publication date as 2005.

offer few insights into the moral and ethical content of role play and its implications for children's personality development.

In studies such as those by Marcolino (2013) and Brigatto (2018), for example, the content of play is problematized in the sense of drawing attention to the need for the teacher to intervene in "controversial" situations that may arise during role enactment. Marcolino (2013, p. 70) states:

The development of critical awareness of social relations is necessarily linked to the teacher's intervention in play. (...) Teachers ought to be attentive to the content represented in role play, as it reflects behaviors grounded in social norms and values. In this regard, it is essential to foster a critical understanding of the values of contemporary society, helping children recognize that forms of relationships and norms of conduct are socially and historically constructed, and therefore subject to change. Accordingly, teacher intervention in role play requires a clear ethical and philosophical stance.

In the same vein, Brigatto (2018, p. 84) states:

It is essential that pedagogy address the controversial issues that emerge in play, and that pedagogical actions appropriate to the age group be carefully planned, aiming to cultivate in children an awareness, for example, of health and traffic safety when issues such as the use of alcoholic beverages arise. Following these pedagogical interventions, it is appropriate to revisit play with the same theme in order to observe, through role enactment, whether the intended content has been assimilated.

The literature also comprises a set of experimental studies that involve the planning of play activities with the aim of investigating aspects related to the structure of play and child development, in which the social content of play is either not addressed or is addressed only marginally. The work of Sena and Guimarães (2015) is representative of this trend, as the planned activities specify the themes, roles, and objects made available to the children, but do not problematize the spheres of social reality that will be reconstructed in play, nor consider the ethical and moral implications inherent in certain themes. For example, one specific situation describes a child being prevented by others from playing the role of the prince because of the color of his skin, in which the researchers intervene in the following manner:

(...) seeking to recover the situation that had emerged in the previous class, the teacher-researcher introduced remarks directed toward playing prince and princess. He explained and exemplified that if several children wanted to play prince and/or princess, this tension could be resolved through the adoption of complementary roles; to this end, he used the following words: "...in order to play prince and princess it is also necessary to have the king, the queen, the servant who prepares the princess, the prince, and a very important point—without subjects there is no kingdom!" (Sena & Guimarães, 2015, p. 36).

In this episode, an attempt to overcome the exclusion enacted by children is observed, without confronting the problem of racism underlying the lived scene, nor challenging the limits inherent to the chosen theme itself: the monarchy as a political system of domination. As a result, they end up reaffirming the logic of subordination inherent in "princes and princesses" play, presenting it to the children as a rule to be reconstructed in their activity.

Against this backdrop, we seek to highlight a core contradiction at the heart of scientific investigation and pedagogical practice related to play in contemporary society: if the development of role play depends on the assimilation of rules of social conduct and, therefore, on the playful reconstruction of social relations among adults, it is crucial to recognize that such relations are, to a great extent, oriented by rules that embody the alienation inherent to capitalist society. Faced with this impasse and considering

the importance of play for ethical and moral development in childhood, it is imperative to reflect on the problem of the content of play.

If the form of play activity corresponds to the creation of an imaginary situation in which children engage in role enactment through synthetic and abbreviated playful actions that reconstruct the norms, motives, and meanings underlying social relations, then attention must be given to the content of this activity — namely, the models of human relations that are reconstructed and enacted by children, and subsequently internalized as elements of their consciousness. Faced with a play activity that is structurally well developed—reaching the highest levels of development described by Elkonin (2019)—yet takes as its content aspects of alienation (such as racism, sexism, political domination, social exclusion, or violence), one could raise the question of whether it truly serves as a valid parameter of development. In the same way, when role play enacts the abbreviated and synthesized reproduction of alienated relations, its status as an expression of the development of higher psychological functions or of personality becomes an issue.

The central matter this study seeks to highlight is the relationship between the development of the structure of role play — that is, the form of the activity — and the social content that becomes objectified in playful enactment. We argue that, in the absence of an articulation between play form and enacted social content, there is a risk of formulating an assessment of the impacts of play activity on the development of higher psychological functions without adequately problematizing the value-laden positions on social life that are gradually incorporated into consciousness and personality.

Aiming to contribute to the clarification of these questions, the research presented here sought to investigate the role of the content–form relationship within the conceptual framework elaborated by Elkonin (2019) in his major work, *Psychology of Play*. The study was guided by the following hypothesis: within Elkonin's general theory of play, the content of role play constitutes a fundamental criterion for analyzing the formation of conscious activity and for guiding pedagogical practice in early childhood education, thereby reaffirming the unity of content and form as a central principle for investigating play activity.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The investigation was theoretical and bibliographic in nature, framed within cultural-historical psychology and underpinned by the philosophical foundation of historical-dialectical materialism. The general aim of this study was to examine, in Elkonin's *Psychology of Play* (2019), how the issue of the content of children's role play is treated, focusing on the articulation between the form (structure) of role play activity and the historical contents of social relations reconstructed in children's play actions, with a view to the ethical and political formation of conscious activity.

Based on the propositions of Lima and Mioto (2007) regarding bibliographic research, the study was organized into four stages:

(i) *contextualization of the bibliographic material*, situating *Psychology of Play* (2019) within Elkonin's academic-scientific production and in the historical-social context in which it was produced;

(ii) *delimitation of axes of analysis*, seeking to grasp the fundamental conceptual categories that underlie and sustain the problem under study;

(iii) *systematic and interpretative reading of the work*, identifying its internal logic and the insertion of the issue of the social content of play throughout the chapters, in light of the axes of analysis;

(iv) *integrative synthesis of the results*, articulating the data found in the previous stage with the unity of content and form, so as to highlight it within the work studied.

## **FINDINGS: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

Successive readings of *Psychology of Play* revealed the *centrality of content* in Elkonin's (2019) theorization of role-play activity, highlighting the unity between the social content and the playful form of children's play — thereby corroborating the research hypothesis. The centrality of content is demonstrated through four conceptual categories:

- i) the historical project of society to which *Psychology of Play* is linked, as evidenced through its historical contextualization;
- ii) the method of understanding reality that underpins the work;
- iii) the conception of human development that informs the explanation of the role of play in the child's development, presupposing a specific understanding of the individual–society relationship;
- iv) pedagogical principles and practice, understood both as a condition for the development of play and as a framework giving meaning to the scientific production on play, thereby providing guidance for educational action.

These axes synthesize and particularize the general conclusion we have reached: the unity of content and form runs throughout Elkonin's work in multiple dimensions, with content occupying a central place in his general theory of play. In the following sections, we will demonstrate this centrality.

### **The Centrality of Content as a Premise of the Historical Project of Society (the Work Situated in Its Historical Context)**

In the note "Research Biography," included in the 2019 by Martins Fontes publisher, Elkonin (2019, p. 8) asserts:

A notable peculiarity of the research on the psychology of children's play conducted by Vigotski's followers is that it was not directed by a single will or a single mind, nor organized around a single coordinating center. For this reason, it lacked the logical continuity that would have allowed problems to be resolved sequentially in the then-unexplored field of children's play. Nevertheless, it represented a collective endeavor, guided by the theoretical principles outlined by Vigotski, to which each researcher contributed.

Considered within the broader context of Soviet research on child psychology, *Psychology of Play* (2019) emerges in this excerpt as the product of a collective scientific endeavor — one driven not by the 'genius' of a single researcher or by personal interests, but by the theoretical assumptions and overarching investigative priorities of historical-cultural psychology. This perspective invites reflection on the historical conditions that explain the development of this theory, thereby enabling the historically situating of the problem of the content–form relationship in human development.

In seeking to understand and contextualize Elkonin's *Psychology of Play* (2019), it is necessary to attend to two essentially interconnected dynamics. The first concerns the internal motivations within the field of Marxist psychology that led to the systematic study of children's play. The second —

determinant with respect to the first — relates to the historical conditions specific to Soviet society that shaped the elaboration of a psychology grounded in the Marxist method and ethically committed, in its principles, to the construction of socialism. From this perspective, recovering the historicity of Elkonin's thought and work is crucial, as it allows for the understanding of the historical foundations that gave rise to the social necessity of *Psychology of Play*, and moreover, of a theory devoted to the study of the content-form problem in human activity. While we do not attempt an exhaustive historiographical analysis of the historical contradictions surrounding the creation of the book or the formation of Soviet society, the following paragraphs seeks to situate the work within the broader social, political, and economic transformations that unfolded over more than fifty years.

According to Tuleski (2008), the transformations of Russian society catalyzed by the revolutionary process of 1917 shook a wide range of social sectors in Eastern Europe, bringing about profound changes in the economic, political, and cultural spheres. On the eve of the Revolution, Russia was still predominantly feudal and aristocratic, with low levels of education. Although a substantial working class had already emerged, the peasantry remained the majority of the population (Tuleski, 2008). In this context, the October Revolution faced the challenge of constructing socialism in a society still undergoing the internal transformations of capitalism, determining that class struggle persisted even after the revolutionary process, particularly because the expropriation of the bourgeoisie did not coincide with its immediate disappearance — as bourgeois relations of production and the mechanisms through which they were reproduced were not fully eliminated (Lazaretti, 2011).

At the heart of the class contradictions that persisted in Soviet society, and at the same time of the imminent possibility of their overcoming, lies the core of the constitution of cultural-historical psychology. Contrary to what one might assume, the construction of a Marxist psychology did not arise from the end of class contradictions; it was precisely their persistence that posed the challenge of building a new psychological science, aligned with the ethical-political task of constructing communism (Lazaretti, 2011).

In this context, Marxism spread, and psychology incorporated dialectical materialism as a method of analysis capable of overcoming the limits of the “old psychology,” moving toward the construction of a general theory that would depart from “a single explanatory basis for human phenomena” (Tuleski, 2008, p. 91). Based on a historicized view of human development, the aim was to overcome the particularisms of bourgeois science by constructing a scientific psychology oriented toward the practical challenges of its historical moment. Lazaretti (2011) points out that cultural-historical psychology emerged as a collective endeavor that sought not only to figure out the general laws that guide human development, but to know them in order to act upon reality, taking them as a guiding assumption for practice. It is within this system of relations between Soviet society and the development of cultural-historical psychology that Elkonin's work is situated: he was immersed in the contradictions of his historical time and his ideas cannot be understood apart from the development of cultural-historical psychology as a whole.

According to Lazaretti (2011), by around the 1930s, Vigotski's School had already begun to split the work into distinct research “specialties,” and Elkonin undertook the task of studying the process of the formation of child psychology, focusing particularly on role-play. His work with Vigotski began to develop especially from Elkonin's interest in paidology — a type of science that emerged in the USSR

dedicated to the study of the child in all its complexity, approached from multiple perspectives such as sociology, pedagogy, physiology, and genetics (Lazaretti, 2011).

It is intriguing to consider the existence of a science such as paidology: its elaboration seemed to reflect the social interest in constructing a “whole” human being — undivided, not fragmented into body and mind, nature and culture, content and form. At the same time, it pointed to the insufficiency of psychology to effectively foster human development in practice: although psychological science provided the theoretical and scientific framework concerning the general principles of development, its realization in concrete life depended (and still depends) on the support of education.

In this sense, when the authors of cultural-historical psychology turn to the study of children’s play, they do not approach it as a problem circumscribed to psychological knowledge alone, but rather as a question that responds to social needs in constructing *a new human sociability* (Vigotski, 1930). In investigating play, their primary concern is to uncover the internal movement that gives rise to this special form of activity in ontogenesis, how it unfolds in the preschool years, and what tendencies for the future it carries. This process of inquiry aimed to create conditions for intervening in development by elaborating educational processes capable of materializing this new sociability, aligned with socialist principles.

The content–form problem in development appears from the very beginnings of the construction of cultural-historical psychology as a scientific challenge precisely because it is also a historical one: the epistemological understanding of personality as a synthesis of social relations is intrinsically linked to the political perspective of elevating human personality to a new level, one of humanizing contents. The need to uncover what is most determinant for the development of activity, consciousness, and personality at each age — that is, the *content* of each developmental stage in articulation with the psychological formation(s) it presupposes and engenders — presented itself to psychological science as a condition for building effective pedagogical praxis.

According to Elkonin (2019), at the beginning of 1933, Vigotski carried out a series of activities at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad with the aim of discussing preschool psychology. Among them was the lecture ‘*Play and its Role in the Mental Development of the Child*’, in which Vigotski (2021) presented his reflections on children’s play, assuming that this activity would be “the leading line of development in the preschool age” (p. 210). Elkonin’s (2019, p. 3) states as follows: “it was in the ideas expressed by Vigotski in these lectures that I found support for my later research on the psychology of play.” Thus, his work was directed primarily toward experimentally testing the hypotheses formulated in 1933, adopting the theoretical-methodological framework of cultural-historical psychology as the guiding basis of his investigations.

Drawing on Vigotski’s general principles, Leontiev’s theoretical elaborations on human activity, Galperin’s studies on thought, among several other authors — and, above all, the revolutionary legacy engendered by the 1917 upheavals — Elkonin was able to develop a vast body of research on child development. From 1959 onwards, with the establishment of a nationalized educational project whose aim was to create Experimental Schools that would put into practice the theoretical findings achieved thus far in psychology and pedagogy, Elkonin and his colleagues were able to create a theoretical model of developmental age periods (Lazaretti, 2011).

Assuming as its guiding principle the supra-individual character of human activity, this endeavor sought “to elucidate the problem of developmental periods in ontogenesis: to uncover the

driving forces of the developmental process — and, ultimately, the very nature of this process” (Pasqualini & Asbahr, 2019, p. 8), as a condition for educational praxis. Within this project, the significance of *The Psychology of Play* (Elkonin, 2019) was not restricted solely to studies on the preschool child. Although it addresses a particular problem of development, it incorporates the general method of analysis, offering theoretical and methodological contributions aligned with the challenge of constructing not only a Marxist psychology but also a Marxist-based education.

In this sense, it can be said that the contradiction between the *content and form* of human activity — and its implications for the ethical-political aspect of personality — emerges in *Psychology of Play* precisely because it had first been posed as a problem for society itself. In the Soviet context of the twentieth century, humanity encountered, for the first time, the foundations for embracing the challenge of realizing a form of human sociability that could overcome the fragmentations of the bourgeois individual, potentially elevating human development to levels closer to its maximal human-generic possibilities.

Therefore, *Psychology of Play* arises amid the historical challenge of constructing a new individual for a new society. Within this horizon, the study of human development, grounded in dialectical and historical materialism, was conceived in Soviet society as a necessary condition for building an effective education — one attentive to the transformations of conscious activity and personality at each developmental stage, so as to intervene in this process in a given ethical-political direction. Thus, it becomes impossible to analyze *The Psychology of Play* and the treatment its author gives to the unity of content and form without recognizing the Marxist character of cultural-historical psychology. The book bears the complexity of being both the product of a collective scientific project and of a society that asked itself — at times more radically than at others — how to effectively produce a new form of human sociability.

### **The centrality of content as a premise of the method for knowing reality**

To highlight the Marxist foundations of *The Psychology of Play* (Elkonin, 2019) is of particular importance for the exam of the content–form unity in role-play because, from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, objective knowledge depends on unveiling the relations between form and content, between appearance and essence. As Kosik (2002, p. 20) states:

The type of thinking that destroys pseudoconcreteness in order to attain concreteness is, at the same time, a process through which the real world is unveiled beneath the world of appearances; behind the external appearance of the phenomenon, the law of the phenomenon is disclosed; behind the visible movement, the real inner movement; behind the phenomenon, the essence.

Martins and Lavoura (2018) argue that the discovery of the tensions inherent in the content–form unity constitutes one of the fundamental principles for theoretical knowledge. Nonetheless, they highlight that clarifying the relations between content and form of a given object is only possible if all the other principles of the method are also present in the investigation.

Thus, if our objective is to understand, in *Psychology of Play* (2019), how the content–form unity is addressed, it is necessary to analyze it in *relation* to the set of theoretical-methodological principles of Marxism. Therefore, more than simply identifying the passages in which the author directly addresses the problem of content, it is essential to analyze how the precepts of the method are made alive in his studies, grasping precisely the way in which they apply to the object under investigation – roleplaying.

Thus, let us begin by looking at what the author designates as the object of his investigations: “the object of our research is the nature and content of role play, the psychology of this evolved form of play activity, its origin, its development and decline, its significance for the life and development of the child as a future personality.” Elkonin (2019, p. 21). From this passage, two methodological aspects stand out: the first concerns the stated necessity – already at the level of the research problem – not merely to identify the formal aspects of role play, but to uncover its fundamental *content*. The second, in turn, refers to the task of studying the object in its *development*, analyzing the transition between its less and more evolved forms. On the one hand, the author highlights the need to grasp the content of play; on the other, he makes it clear that it is the analysis of its development — both ontogenetic and historical, as demonstrated throughout the book — that will allow such understanding.

By inquiring into the content of play — understanding it as a condition for grasping the form of this human activity and thereby effectively intervening in the process of the child’s personalization — Elkonin (2019) indicates the path through which scientific knowledge may come to explain the object of study in its most essential aspects. In this process, the need to apprehend the content of role-play is intertwined with the challenge of constructing a general theory of play capable of clarifying the regularities and laws that guide the development of children’s conscious activity. The fulfillment of such an endeavor, however, is to be guided by a method.

In Chapter 1, entitled “The object of research is the form of children’s play activity”, the author presents as the first methodological principle of his investigation the substitution of a disintegrative analysis of the whole into elements with a *disaggregative analysis of units*. From this perspective, the fragmentation of the object of study into disjointed parts gives way to an analysis of the object in its totality, seeking to identify the element that contains the indivisible properties preserving the whole. Through the *inverse method* - that is, “the study of the essence of a given phenomenon through the analysis of its most developed form” (Duarte, 2000, p. 84) - the evolved form of role-play is taken as a condition for investigating the content of this activity. The author states:

How can we find this unit of play, which can no longer be divided, which preserves the properties of the whole? Only by examining the evolved form of role play, as it presents itself to us in the middle of the preschool age (...). This trajectory from top to bottom, from the analysis of the most developed form to the history of its emergence and decline, is opposed to trivial evolutionism and constitutes the second major methodological principle of our investigation. (Elkonin, 2019, p. 24)

Such statements lead us to two points: the first concerns the fact that the methodological choices made by the researcher are not indifferent to the analysis of the content of the object under study, since taking inadequate investigative paths also leads to inadequate conclusions. Elkonin (2019) highlights this aspect in Chapter 3 of the book, entitled “Theory of Play”, in which he subjects to critique a series of theories that turned to the study of play but, by employing methods incapable of analyzing the object from a wholeness perspective, ended up formulating theses that, although contributing to the grasp of the formal aspects of play, reveal little of the real content of this activity:

Almost all researchers who have devoted themselves to describing young children’s games repeat, in different ways, Sully’s idea that the essence of children’s play lies in representing some role. However, the analysis of play does not lead to an explanation of the structure of the role itself, of its genesis, but rather to a description of the peculiarities of fantasy of which play appears to be a manifestation (Elkonin, 2019, p. 26, our emphasis).

Elkonin's work, moving in the opposite direction of these currents, seeks to *explain* the structure and content of role-play, which leads us to the second central point: *Psychology of Play* is a *theory* of role-play. After all, the proper scientific apprehension of play depends on going beyond the mere empirical observation of the object of study towards its explanation. To achieve such an objective, theoretical abstraction is required — one that investigates play from the perspective of the history of its development, guiding thought to transcend the most immediate elements of play (Lazaretti, 2011).

With the aim of apprehending the historical materiality that constitutes his object, Elkonin (2019) dismisses metaphysical analyses or subjectivist speculations regarding role play. Instead, he takes as points of departure both the theoretical accumulation already produced by humanity around the object of study (as can be observed in Chapter 3 of the work) and the construction of a method truly capable of grasping the most essential aspects of this phenomenon, reflecting in thought its own internal movement.

In light of this second point, the research collective to which Elkonin belonged carried out a series of studies which, based on the *genetic-experimental method*, aimed at intentionally intervening in reality in order to uncover not only the connections among structural elements but also the transitions between the less and more developed forms of play — thus revealing the ontogenetic development of role play:

Such a strategy of shaping a given process up to a predetermined level is widely employed in the works of numerous psychologists belonging to Vigotski's school. This strategy, which has been termed the genetic-experimental method, is fundamentally distinguished from the simple experiment, insofar as it entails the active formation of the transition of the process or activity from lower levels to progressively higher ones (Elkonin, 2019, pp. 240–241).

In Chapters 4 and 5, entitled, respectively, "*The Origin of Play in Ontogeny*" and "*The Development of Play in the Preschool Age*", Elkonin (2019) presents and analyzes the data of these investigations, arriving at a conclusion of particular importance for our study: play has as its fundamental content the reconstitution of human activity, of labor, and of social relations between people; such content is synthesized in the social role enacted by the child. Thus, for the author, the structural element of play that embodies the movement of its content is the role: subordinated to it are the playful actions, the playful use of objects, and the authentic relations among children. Precisely for this reason, the role and the actions deriving from it constitute, according to Elkonin (2019, p. 29), the "fundamental and indivisible unit of the evolution of the form of play".

By identifying the role as the *minimal unit* of role play, the author provides important indications for the study of the content of play, since he highlights that the key to its analysis lies in the content of the *role* itself. Thus, although other elements of the play structure contribute to the expression of the content of play (such as the reconstituted themes and the objects used within the play activity), it is the role that acts in the most determining way, being, in fact, the element without which role-play cannot exist:

(...) the constitutive aspect of play is that the child assumes some role. Without this, play cannot take place. As soon as the role appears, play appears. It is not obligatory to play the role of an adult, since one may also assume the role of another child (there are known games in which children take on the roles of animals). Nor is it necessary in play to create a special ludic situation with the transfer of meaning from some objects to others. Play is possible while maintaining the

full reality of objects, actions, and the general situation (for example, when assuming the roles of companions, children may actually go for a walk, put on a coat, take a toy, etc.; they may play “kindergarten,” draw, solve problems, read, etc.), but even while doing all this they are necessarily assuming a role (Elkonin, 2019, p. 284).

For Elkonin (2019), when assuming a role within play, the child is compelled to single out from reality the relations between people, and for this reason, the development of its content depends not only on the child grasping the essential features of adult activity, but also on subordinating their actions to the rules of conduct underlying the role. In play, therefore, there is the development of the child’s *attitude* toward the rules of the adult world, which gradually emerge as the “central core of the role represented by the child” (Elkonin, 2019, p. 324).

By foregrounding the rules of social conduct as the content of the role, The Psychology of Play (2019) demonstrates that the appropriate methodological path for studying play is one that analyzes children’s activity as historical activity. As a specific form through which the child participates in and makes sense of the reality in which they live — transforming social relations into the content not only of their consciousness but also of their developing personality—play is conceived as a social and therefore real activity, defined above all by its content. In play, children reconstruct relations that concretely exist, and thus, as Elkonin (2019, p. 35) affirms: “play is not the realm of pure invention, but an original reconstitution of lived reality, a reconstitution made by the child when giving form to the roles of adults.”

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the investigation of the content of play cannot be separated from the analysis of the contradictions inherent to reality. In other words, its investigation necessarily takes as its basis the analysis of the objective reality that surrounds and shapes children’s activity. This is because, beyond the fact that the content of play is precisely that *which*, from the sphere of human activity, is reflected in play through the social role, it also *develops* and may assume increasingly complex forms depending on the educational conditions made available to the child. The author states:

The content of play reveals the child’s more or less profound penetration into adult activity; it may reveal only the external aspect of human activity, or the object with which the adult operates, or the attitude adopted toward their activity and toward other people, or, finally, the social meaning of human labor. Of course, the concrete character of the relations between people represented in play varies greatly. These relations may be of cooperation, mutual help, division of labor, and care and attention for one another; but they may also be relations of authoritarianism, even despotism, hostility, harshness, and so forth. Everything depends on the concrete social conditions in which the child lives (Elkonin, 2019, p. 35).

Between the content of play and the content of social life, therefore, there exists a unity that can only be fully understood through the role enacted by the child. In this sense, we propose that *Psychology of Play* (Elkonin, 2019), through the disaggregating analysis of units and the inverse method, demonstrates that the ludic role substantiates the content-form unity of role play. This is because while presupposing the playful form — since it exists only in play — the role also presupposes the reconstitution of a specific social content, since without such content it cannot be enacted.

Under the guidance of the Marxist method and through Elkonin’s hands, the word “play” is converted into a scientific concept. Drawing on the theoretical-methodological legacy of Soviet psychology, by identifying in the role enacted by the child the minimal unit of analysis of play, the author unveils the social nature of this activity, advancing in the demonstration of the historical character of the content of role play. The emphasis on the historicity of play, while presenting itself as the result of the

research method employed, is as a condition for the elaboration of objective knowledge about it. In this regard, we believe that the uniqueness of *The Psychology of Play* (2019) derives, above all, from its methodological rigor. When applied to the particular object of roleplaying, the principles of Marxism allow for the theoretical understanding of children's play to be raised to a new level, for it is by attempting to analyze play from a wholeness approach that Elkonin (2019) finds, in the analysis of content, the path to the genuine comprehension of the form of this activity.

### **The centrality of content as a premise of the conception of human development (the individual–society relationship)**

The methodological paths assumed in *The Psychology of Play* (2019) lead us to another element necessary for the scientific investigation of the content–form unity: the analysis of the relations established between individual development and the mode of organization of life in society. Although we approached this discussion in the previous section, this is a problem that deserves closer examination, given the centrality that the individual–society relationship holds for cultural-historical psychology and the decisive implications it carries for the analysis of the content of role play.

From the perspective of cultural-historical psychology, the unity between individual and society is grounded in the dialectic of objectification–appropriation; that is, it is posited that the formation of the individual depends on the subject incorporating into their own existence the human culture objectified by the collective of human beings. In the preschool years, as we have argued thus far, the driving element of children's psychological development is the appropriation of social relations among people, which, in turn, are originally objectified in role play.

This assertion, however, does not yet explain why social relations become the content of children's activity. In other words, we must ask: why do children play? In what way and for what reasons does role play develop in the preschool age? Why did the reconstitution of social relations among people become a social necessity? Finally, what are the implications that understanding the nature of play carries for grasping its content? In attempting to answer such questions, we must examine an element central to the problem of the content of role play and which was the target of Elkonin's (2019) critiques: naturalism.

As noted earlier, Chapter 3 of *Psychology of Play* analyzes a series of works that, in various ways, addressed children's play as an object of investigation. With the aim of identifying the limits and advances brought by these studies, Elkonin (2019) focuses primarily on Gross's exercise theory, Buytendijk's play theory, and Freud's psychoanalytic theory, understanding that it is on the basis of these authors' formulations that a substantial part of Western studies on play and child psychology developed. He also examines the works of Stern, Claparède, Bühler, Piaget, Chateau, Koffka, Lewin, and several Soviet authors such as Basov and Blonsky.

Given the scope and objectives of this work, we will not turn to a detailed description of each of the theories subjected to Marxist critique in Elkonin's book. What is important to highlight is the following: Elkonin (2019) begins from the analysis of *the most advanced* theories of his time and, in this sense, engages in dialogue with authors who possess a solid theoretical-methodological framework for apprehending reality. Nevertheless, all of them preserve, to some extent, traits that naturalize development, since they fall into two fundamental errors: (1) they deny the *qualitative* difference between

human and animal development, and (2) they assume the premise that the relationship between individual and society is one of opposition, in which the individual would be formed *in spite of* society.

These misconceptions are expressed, on the one hand, in the assumption of play as a merely “preparatory” stage for adult life—a notion derived from the generalization and direct transposition of results obtained from observations of animal play to that of children. On the other hand, they appear in the defense of play as the outcome of a contradiction between the child’s world and the adult world, in which the child, seeking to escape the restrictive impositions of adults, would realize his or her individual desires through imagination. In this process, the problem of content dissipates, giving way to conceptions that naturalize children’s play—whether through the biologization of this activity or through an idealist analysis of the motives underlying play.

It thus becomes evident that the absence of a social theory to ground the analysis of child development leads to formulations which, besides concealing the historical materiality of the content of role play, also obscure the fundamentally social nature of this activity.

Subverting the traditional paths pursued by the authors of his time, and assuming the theoretical-practical commitment to uncover the elements that mediate the content-form unity of play, Elkonin (2019) turns to history. Throughout the chapters, he investigates the genesis of role play in the history of society, the history of the concept of “play,” and the history of play in ontogenesis.

The examination of play from the standpoint of the history of society constitutes a pivotal element that marks the Marxist position of the work. Unlike the hegemonic theories of play, Soviet researchers sought to investigate the origin and content of play not within the child *per se*, but within society, beginning with that which is most central to human existence: the organization of labor. From the perspective of historical materialism, the foundations of social relations lie in the relations of production, for, as Martins (2008, p. 47) affirms, “it is within these relations that human beings construct not only the means for their survival, but, above all, build themselves.” In this sense, understanding the psychological particularities of play requires taking into account the ways in which social life is organized.

In Chapter 2, entitled “On the Historical Origin of Role Play”, Elkonin (2019) addresses precisely this point, seeking to investigate the historical origin of both toys and play itself. By framing it as an indispensable aspect for the investigation of the content and form of role-play, he approaches his object historically, as a phenomenon that has not always existed and that will not necessarily exist eternally in the same way, as it embodies a process of socio-historical development. Thus, the historical meaning of play does not appear in Elkonin’s book as a mere formalism or curiosity, but as a fundamental logical-explanatory principle: it is from this standpoint that one may grasp the psychological essence of this activity, safeguarding it against any remnants of naturalism or idealism.

Elkonin (2019) sets out from the challenge of clarifying two main elements: (1) the position in society that the child occupies in the various periods of social development, and (2) the transformation of the social content of children’s activity throughout history. As the author states (2019, p. 49):

Our task is to answer, even if only hypothetically, at least two questions. The first is: has role play always existed, or was there a period in social life in which this form of children’s play was unknown? The second: to what changes in social life and in the situation of the child within society is the emergence of role play to be attributed?

To analyze such parameters, the researcher carries out a study that involves the analysis of anthropological research data from different societies, situated at distinct levels of development of the productive forces. In an attempt to understand the place children occupied in society in relation to adults, as well as the activities they performed, the historical movement of the child-adult relationship is examined, ranging from the analysis of primitive communities — in which everyone participated in the productive process — to societies of primitive communism, where the division of labor was already present (Elkonin, 2019).

Throughout the chapter, Elkonin (2019) argues that play has not always existed as an activity specific to childhood. Its emergence is historical, arising from the increasing complexity of labor relations and modes of production, which gradually necessitated the separation of children from productive work. From this perspective, the more complex labor becomes, the greater the need for children to be educated in order to participate in it, since mastering the instruments employed in the productive process could no longer take place immediately, through mere observation of adults, but demanded that adults establish teaching relations with children. The author summarizes:

It is possible to formulate the most important thesis for the theory of role-play: this form of play arises in the course of the historical development of society as a result of the change in the place of the child within the system of social relations. Consequently, it is of social origin and nature. Its emergence is connected with very concrete social conditions of the child's life in society and not with the action of any instinctive, innate, or internal energy of any kind (Elkonin, 2019, p. 80).

The argument for the social and historical character of role-play, as both a product and an expression of the Marxist method, is particularly important for those of us researching the content of play, as it helps to denaturalize what children thematize within play and the content of their roles. By locating the origin of this special form of human activity in its genetic connection to labor, Elkonin (2019) emphasizes that the themes typically reconstructed in role play are not the product of any inner force or instinct of the child, but rather a reflection of the social relations to which the child has access:

Playing with dolls, widespread in our society mainly among girls, has always been presented as an instinct of motherhood. The facts mentioned refute this point of view and demonstrate that this classic form of girls' play is not, by any means, a manifestation of maternal instinct, but rather a reproduction of the social relations existing in that society — in this case, concretely, the social division of labor in childcare (Elkonin, 2019, p. 446).

The opposition to the “innatism” of play and its content is not, however, restricted to examining this activity from the standpoint of social history: it also finds support in the analyses conducted in Chapter 4, entitled “*The Origin of Play in Ontogeny*”, which sought to understand how play emerges within the very process of child development. In this context, the author points out that the scientific study of play and the unveiling of its fundamental internal content, even when the aim is to understand the developmental process itself, cannot be separated from the methodological principle of wholeness. In his words,

The evolution of play activity is closely related to the overall development of the child. One can only speak of the evolution of play after the fundamental sensory-motor coordinations have been formed, since these provide the possibility of manipulating and acting upon objects.

Without knowing how to hold an object in one's hand, any action with it — including play — is impossible (Elkonin, 2019, p. 207, emphasis added).

In this regard, analyzing the formal elements of play alone is insufficient; it is equally important to examine how the content of play unfolds, taking the child's overall developmental process as the guiding framework. In other words, the study of the content of play appears in Elkonin's book as dependent on the understanding of child's development as a *system*, in which the emergence of a leading activity is always related to two central elements: (1) the psychological achievements of the previous period, and (2) the new social position that such psychological achievements make possible for the child to occupy in the child–adult relationship.

Turning to the first year of life and early childhood as the first two stable age periods, Elkonin (2019) argues that the emergence of play activity depends on the development of three fundamental premises, which are closely tied to the development of language. These are: the formation of the act of grasping, the formation of reiterative and concatenated movements, and, finally, the mastery of the cultural functions of objects. Thus, for a child to eventually engage in role-play, it is a prerequisite that they first be capable of manipulating objects and, later, of manipulating them according to their socially established modes of use. Drawing on the studies of Frádkina, Slávina, and Michailenko, Elkonin (2019, p. 259) summarizes:

The developmental path of play proceeds from concrete action with objects, to synthesized play action, and from there to role play: there is *the spoon; feeding with the spoon; feeding the doll with the spoon; feeding the doll as the mother does*. Such, schematically, is the path toward role play.

In this excerpt, one can observe how the content of children's activity develops throughout play, as well as the new activity structures that emerge from it. Initially, the content of children's activity consists of actions with objects; at a later stage, social relations gain prominence, gradually becoming synthesized and abbreviated into social roles. The transition between these moments, however, is neither spontaneous nor driven by forces inherent to the child herself; on the contrary, it is based on the educational relationship established between the adult and the child. Elkonin (2019, p. 231) states: "as evidenced by Frádkina's investigations, all the fundamental premises of play appear during the development of the child's activity with objects under the guidance of adults and in joint activity with them". Behind every psychological achievement in childhood, therefore, there is an adult who guides, demands, and "pulls" the child's development, providing not only the models of action and ways of relating to reality, but also the content of children's activity at each stage of development.

It thus becomes evident that, contrary to the theories analyzed in Chapter 3, Elkonin (2019) understands that between the child and the adult — or, more broadly, between the individual and society — there is no logical or ontological opposition. In reality, psychological development occurs in relation to society, which guides, educates, and provides the fundamental content of children's activity. It is important to highlight, however, that Elkonin (2019) does not adopt just *any* conception of the social phenomenon; rather, he apprehends it from the standpoint of class struggle, understanding that at the core of society lie the social relations of production, which generate not only relations that humanize subjects but also relations that dehumanize and alienate human beings from their own humanity. In view of this, the social relations reconstructed through role-play are not regarded as ethically and politically

neutral, nor are their effects on the formation of children's personality negligible. In Elkonin's words (2019, pp. 420–21):

Since the content of roles centers primarily, as we have already seen, on the norms of relations between people, [...] one could say that, in play, the child enters a developed world of the highest forms of human activity, a developed world of rules governing relations between people. The norms on which these relations are based become, through play, a source of the child's moral development itself. In this sense, however much one may emphasize the importance of play, it can hardly be overstated. Play is the school of morality — not of morality in thought, but of morality in action.

In conclusion, one can affirm that role-play appears in *The Psychology of Play* (2019) as an activity of social nature and content, and for this reason it is neither innate nor a form of the child "escaping" reality. In fact, it consists of an activity forged within/by educational relations — a particular way for the child to immerse deeply in the real world, assimilating the contradictions that constitute it. Although expressed in the individual, play finds its most essential determinations in the modes of relations between people; therefore, the investigation of its content requires unveiling the existence of the individual in *unity* with the social processes that determine life.

### **The Centrality of Content as a Foundational Principle of Pedagogy**

The unveiling of the social character of role-play's content has important conceptual implications, as it elucidates the most essential features of this activity. It also entails practical challenges. Because play is a specifically human—and thus historical—activity, it must be understood as a product of human action. Its realization in each child depends upon the deliberate efforts of older generations to nurture and sustain it.

Pasqualini (2006) details the meaning of *appropriation* in Leontiev, emphasizing the educational character inherent in the dialectic between the incorporation of human culture and the objectification of what is new in each individual. The author states (2006, p. 82):

[The process of appropriation] necessarily involves *communication* between human beings and, ultimately, always constitutes a process of *education*. This happens because the *appropriate activity* does not develop on its own in the child, through *direct, immediate or spontaneous* contact with cultural objects. Although such objects embody historically elaborated modes of action and human capacities, the *mediation* of other people is necessary for the process of appropriation to be actualized" (emphasis in the original).

It is evident, therefore, that at the core of the individual–society relationship lies the educational process, with pedagogical guidance being the element that allows specifically human forms of existence to take shape in each singular subject. Thus, if role-play is an activity with a social nature and content, we now focus on how the education of this content is conceived by Elkonin — that is, how, in the author's view, the content of human relations is transformed into the content of children's lives.

Faced with this challenge, and drawing on the studies of Lúkov, Vigotskaia, Mikhailenko, and Sokolova—which involved both typically and atypically developing children—Elkonin (2019) sought to uncover the general laws governing the formation of play activity in young children, clarifying the process through which adults educate role-play. In this regard, he focused on the study of a fundamental element of play: symbolization.

Contrary to the theories critiqued in the work, which attributed the formation of symbolism in play to the child's "naturally developed" imagination, Elkonin (2019) demonstrates that imagination is, in fact, a product of play, and that the symbolism manifested within it is closely linked to the development of speech and real actions with objects. In the author's words, for symbolization to occur, "the word must be imbued with all the possible actions with the object" (Elkonin, 2019, p. 351), thereby determining its mode of use and endowing it with a playful character.

This process, however, does not occur spontaneously: as the development of play is closely related to the development of speech and concrete actions with objects, the necessity of the adult *teaching* the child becomes evident. Elkonin states (2019, p. 217):

Without denying that the child may discover the functions of loose objects by carrying out on their own tasks that require the use of instruments, we consider this not to be the fundamental form. The fundamental form is that children and adults act together so that, gradually, the latter transmit to the former the socially established ways of using objects. In this joint activity, adults organize the child's actions in accordance with a model, and then stimulate and monitor the evolution of their formation and execution.

Moreover, the author draws attention to the fact that symbolization does not occur only 'in the transition from acting with one object to another, by renaming it' (Elkonin, 2019, p. 355), but also when the child assumes the role of an adult. This process, again, is not spontaneous. Elkonin (2019) states that the entire development of role play requires the guidance of adults, since the development of the role depends not only on it being 'saturated' with actions, but also on the child's clear understanding of the connections between the role and the actions corresponding to it. However, the revelation of these connections is carried out by adults.

The creation of a play situation by adults and the child's immersion in the adult's role—even one that is well known and close to the child by the nature of its activity—does not in itself ensure the possibility of acting in accordance with the role. For children, the connection between the role and the actions in which its dramatic meaning can be embodied remains hidden. This connection between the role and the actions related to it does not arise spontaneously, and it is the responsibility of adults to reveal it to the child" (Elkonin, 2019, p. 262).

The mistaken impression that play develops spontaneously arises from the fact that "adults do not perceive the guidance they exert" (Elkonin, 2019, p. 259). Studies cited by Elkonin (2019) suggest that it is precisely adults who draw the child's attention to the surrounding world and uncover the human labor behind objects, thereby elucidating the functions that people assume and the social meaning of productive work. Ultimately, it is adults who transform the content of social relations into the content of children's lives. For this reason, one of the major contributions of *The Psychology of Play* lies in highlighting the adult who, in all their entirety, exists "hidden" behind the evolution of content and the qualitative transformations engendered in the child's psyche.

The elucidation of the educational direction underlying play is of particular importance for the investigation of the content of role-play. While it reveals the non-spontaneous nature of the spheres of reality reconstituted within children's activity, it also underscores the possibility for adults to intentionally intervene in its development. Indeed, according to Elkonin (2019), this is one of the primary reasons for the systematic study of role-play:

The study of the development of role play is interesting in two respects: first, because it allows for a deeper understanding of the essence of play; second, because by uncovering the mutual connection of the different structural components of play in its development, it becomes possible to facilitate pedagogical guidance and the formation of this most important activity of the child (Elkonin, 2019, p. 233).

It is evident, therefore, that the study of the psychological development of play is closely linked to the need to construct pedagogical pathways that foster its formation, since, as our author points out, this is an activity of decisive importance for the development of the preschool child. This importance — which, for Elkonin (2019), is still far from being fully revealed — rests above all on the transformations this activity brings to the development of the child's consciousness and personality.

In chapter 6, entitled '*Play and Psychic Development*', Elkonin (2019) highlights that the qualitative changes promoted by play can be synthesized into three fundamental neoformations: cognitive decentration, the formation of symbolic thought, and the development of self-control of conduct. For the author, play requires the child to decenter from herself, assuming a conventional — and therefore symbolic — relation with reality. At the same time, it demands that the child make efforts toward self-regulation of behavior, guiding their actions by the rules of conduct implicit in the role: for the first time in ontogenesis it is possible to observe the development of volitional action, conscious of itself.

Precisely for this reason, Elkonin (2019) draws attention to the need for intentional teaching aimed at the shaping of this activity, revealing that it is not only possible but also desirable for adults to take the lead in the pedagogical direction of play. This allows us to infer that preschool education is, in tendency, a social space capable of promoting this activity at its highest levels of development. The author states:

With regard to younger children, their education up until school entry still remains, in most countries — except for the socialist ones — a private matter of the family, and the content and teaching methods are transmitted by tradition. Of course, in some countries there is extensive instructional work with parents, but it is mainly focused on issues of education and hygiene. The pedagogy of family education for children is still little studied. This is because it proves difficult to make parents pedagogues who consciously guide children through the developmental processes in these periods of childhood, which are the most critical and carry the greatest responsibility (Elkonin, 2019, pp. 397–98).

The work *The Psychology of Play* (2019) thus takes a clear stance on the need for the education of young children to extend beyond the boundaries of the private sphere and into the realm of collectivity. In doing so, it contributes to overcoming traditional and unsystematic forms of play education, instead advocating for an educational process grounded in criteria that intentionally guide child development along a specific ethical and political path. The importance of basing early childhood education on such criteria is central to the question of content, for if it is possible to intervene in and guide play, one must then ask in which direction this guidance will be oriented. As Elkonin stated in a text published in 1960:

The content of role-playing games has important educational significance. For this reason, it is necessary to carefully observe what children play. It is essential to acquaint them with those facets of reality whose reproduction in play can exert a positive educational influence and to divert them from representing that which may foster negative qualities (Elkonin, 1960, p. 513).

The ethical-political orientation in the pedagogical approach to play is, from the author's perspective, closely linked to the development of play's content. When adults select spheres of reality to constitute the content of the social roles reconstituted in play, they are simultaneously determining elements that will shape the content of children's lives. It is therefore evident that *The Psychology of Play* does not conceal the ethical-political orientation of educational practice, nor the dependence of the full realization of schooling on society. As Elkonin states (2019, p. 388):

As soon as problems of organized, guided, and pedagogically sound social education arise, their solution encounters a whole series of economic and political difficulties. For society to concern itself with the education of children, it must first and foremost be interested in the comprehensive education of all children, without exception. Such an interest exists only in socialist society.

It is important to emphasize, however, that although Elkonin (2019) highlights the need for the educational guidance of play, his focus is on the development of play from a psychological standpoint. Thus, while he provides pedagogical recommendations — such as the need for adults to present objects, enrich the social role, and redirect children from negative aspects of reality — these remain general guidelines that do not fully address the complex challenge of educating both play and the preschool child in their entirety. This type of guidance, which is crucial to the question of educating the content of play, must be further elaborated and developed, making it the task of contemporary research to build on the legacy of the psychology of play and advance the *pedagogy of play*.

## CLOSING REMARKS

Through the four axes of analysis, we hope to have demonstrated that the problem of content permeates *The Psychology of Play* (Elkonin, 2019) in a multifaceted manner, presenting itself as a central issue for the scientific study of role-play. While broader questions linking the problem of alienated relations in society to preschool child development remain open, we argue that our study — grounded in a seminal work in the field — effectively sustains and recovers the position that the content of role-play constitutes a core structural element in the development of the preschool child, and, therefore, must guide both research and pedagogical practice in early childhood education.

This position takes on particular significance given its ethical and political aspect. Since social relations form the fundamental content of preschool play, in a society marked by profound processes of dehumanization, the values reconstructed within children's activity — and their implications for the development of consciousness and personality — become explicit. Consequently, alongside the assertion that content should guide pedagogical work, we are compelled to continue asking: in which direction should this guidance be oriented toward?

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The data underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

**AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

Author 1 – Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing of the manuscript.

Author 2 – Conceptualization, project coordination, and final manuscript review.

Author 3 – Conceptualization, data analysis, and final manuscript review.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this article.