

## ESSAY

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## Educational policies and activities for preschool children: Reflections from the cultural-historical approach and activity theory

*Políticas educativas y actividades pedagógicas dirigidas a la edad preescolar: reflexiones actuales desde el enfoque histórico cultural y la teoría de la actividad*

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### | Summary |

Educational activities employed with preschool children have significance in their development and preparation for school learning. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze the relationship established between educational policies and educational activities for the preschool population in the Colombian context. In this paper, these two aspects interact to contribute to its conclusion. The teacher's task is to promote the integral development of children and ensure an optimal level of preparation for schooling. Considering current pedagogical practice, this task is not successfully carried out as required by the objectives of educational policy. However, monitoring this psychological and pedagogical approach based on cultural-historical theory highlights both theoretical foundations and methodological pathways for innovating with regard to the educational status of preschool.

**Keywords:** Educational, Psychology; Child Psychology; Learning; Child Development; Child, Preschool (MeSH).

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### Resumen

Las actividades pedagógicas que se realizan con los niños preescolares tienen trascendencia en su desarrollo y preparación para el aprendizaje escolar. Por esta razón es

necesario reflexionar respecto a la relación que se establece entre las políticas educativas y las actividades pedagógicas dirigidas a la población preescolar en el contexto colombiano. En este ensayo se interrelacionan estos dos aspectos para presentar aportaciones a su reflexión. La tarea del maestro es favorecer al desarrollo integral de la población infantil, además de garantizar el nivel óptimo de preparación para los estudios escolares. Si se considera la práctica pedagógica actual, se ve que esta tarea no se resuelve exitosamente como lo exigen los objetivos de las políticas educativas. En cambio, el seguimiento del enfoque psicológico y pedagógico basado en la teoría histórico-cultural señala tanto las bases teóricas como vías metodológicas para innovar la situación educativa del nivel preescolar.

**Palabras clave:** Psicología Educacional; Psicología Infantil; Aprendizaje; Desarrollo Infantil; Preescolar (DeCS).

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### Introduction

When talking about child development, the preschool childhood period is seen as one of the most important, since it is here that psychological changes occur that are decisive for

the initial formation of their personality and the development of personal behavior mechanisms (1,2). This essay arose as a thought activity after comparing some educational policies directed toward the infant population in Colombia (3,4) with the theory of LS Vygotsky to present alternatives that would contribute elements of knowledge to the research field of preschool education.

In this process, activation of evidence from educational practice among 180 preschool age children in the city of Bogotá was considered. To do this, we had access to 8 educational institutions, 4 private and 4 public. Two of the public institutions worked with disabled populations. The educational institutions were chosen by their willingness to participate and are distributed over diverse sectors of the city of Bogotá. The children attending these educational institutions, both public and private, were evaluated with a symbolic development protocol for a study in which symbolic function at preschool age was studied. In addition, observations were made of some of the activities that the educators do with the children in the classroom.

The objective of this essay is to find in which way the educational policies in Colombia fail to respond to the psychological development needs of preschool age children. This failure may be related to varying causes, but the hypothesis of the present reflection lies in the lack of appropriate organization at the theoretical-practical level of the educational process. This reflection is put forward from contributions proposed by Vygotsky's historical-cultural standpoint and allows us to understand the preschool age as a stage of psychological development that has its own content, structure, and goals. Only with a clear theoretical and conceptual standpoint in relation to the preschool age can the current failures in teaching be analyzed and new and alternative methods for preschool institutions be proposed.

Considering that since the end of the 1970s, when Vygotsky's work was spread in the West, the number of studies that have reopened, gone into greater depth, and widened the author's proposal has not stopped growing (5-11). Currently, Vygotsky's theoretical work has spread with greater vigor because the importance of his proposals in psychology and education has been recognized not only from the theoretical point of view but also for their practical applications. The vitality of Vygotsky's work, and that of his followers, can be valued by the great quantity of experimental studies that it has inspired and that have developed his ideas to solve problems in the field of education (12-17).

It is necessary to be aware not only the work of this author but also that of his followers who also contributed to the same methodological and theoretical perspective. There is,

for example, Galperin (18-20) with his research that focuses on abilities for mentally performing a certain action in stages. Liublinskaia (21) put forward the systematization of experimental data relating to the psychological development of children and educational practices with preschool-age children, arguing that the most important changes in the psyche occur between 2 and 7 years of age. It is necessary to specify here that these studies and their results are little known and they are not circulated as is due. Even so, there are followers of this line of psychological and educational research, including the authors of this article.

In research carried out in Mexico and in Colombia, it has been found that preschool age children have not developed specific abilities and particular characteristics that are typical of their psychological age (22,24). For example, a study performed in Mexico had a population of 97 participants who attended the third grade of preschool. They were divided into three groups according to the type of school they attended (22). Group 1 was made up of 57 children that attended an urban public preschool, 30 boys and 27 girls. Group 2 consisted of 20 children at a private urban preschool, 10 boys and 10 girls. Group 3 consisted of 20 children at a rural preschool, 10 boys and 10 girls.

The inclusion criteria included that the children did not have any pathological background, and that they displayed normal performance at school. The results showed that most of the children evaluated, who were about to enter primary school, had not yet reached a sufficient level of development of the voluntary sphere and of the different functions of language. A high percentage of the children required direction and different forms of support to do tasks correctly.

In Colombia, in a study performed with a preschool population consisting of 180 children in public and private institutions from different areas of the city of Bogotá, a low level of symbolic development was found along with low levels of voluntary, reflective, displayed communicative, and imaginative communicative activity. This signals a low level of preparation for the initiation of the school stage.

With this situation, the following questions arise: how can we convince governmental institutions to include characteristics of psychological development in their policies? How can activities that benefit childhood development be implemented considering each psychological age while at the same time avoiding policies that depend on current fashions without any awareness of in-depth theoretical knowledge? How can we make policy coherent with educational practice? How can we help children to develop the abilities characteristic of each psychological age in the Colombian context? How can we achieve conditions of educational quality in the infant

population, something that goes along with better conditions of quality of life?

A response can be found in the type of training given to preschool education teachers. If, starting in professional training, child educators are made aware of the psychological characteristics of children and of the activities that contribute to their development, surely this will be reflected in their classroom actions that will work in favor of the development of the children. Better human beings and children that are more sensitive to the needs of others will be the result.

### Current situation and educational policies in preschool education

What follows is a review of current educational policies in Colombia with the goal of responding to the questions posed above. It is known that currently, educational policy with respect to early childhood has become a national priority. This policy directs its actions toward improving the conditions of child development. It is for this reason that, in order to ensure equitable and quality access, the national Ministry of Education, along with the Childhood and Adolescence Code (25,26), has decided on a right to integral care of children under 5 years of age, attempts to guarantee a development in the framework of their rights, and intends to build the pillars and bases necessary so that all children may enjoy a better quality of life (3,4). The National Public Policy for Early Childhood (27, 28) is the result of a process of social movement that grew from the need to reopen and give new meaning to the topic of effective development opportunities for early childhood in Colombia (25).

One of the objectives of this proposal is that the children may have access to integral care, including educational strategies that would aid in the development of their competencies. Another of the objectives is to no stimulate child development. Here, we are referring to promoting, accompanying, favoring, and strengthening the activities that are important in early childhood. To do this, fundamental elements proposed in the Public Policy on Early Childhood (play, art, literature) are reconsidered. To this is added the exploration of media, putting them forward as primordial forms through which the children relate with other children, with adults, and with the world in order to give it meaning. At the same time, they are the ways most commonly used by adults to relate to them, with the goal of strengthening the development of their different dimensions (personal-social, corporal, communicative, artistic, and cognitive) and their attachment to culture (3).

Unfortunately, in these documents (3,4) certain needs are declared at a very abstract level without proposing any sort of real solution or any way to achieve objectives. Teacher

preparation does not include any kind of strategy or proposal that would ensure the achievement of the goals. Nor is there any reasoning from the conceptual point of view. In other words, what is proposed in the policies is not necessarily part of the educators' professional conventions. Instead, these educators only feel obligated to comply with something that they do not accept as their own and for which they do not see a need. In this way, in reality, the political declarations leave aside the real actions at an educational level, as well as the psychological bases that have to do with possibilities of approaches to practice. They are simply not mentioned. Preschool education in Colombia has been organized without a specific theoretical focus, although, in practice, behaviorist and cognitive models prevail. The psychological needs of the child population are not taken into consideration. These needs are related to the characteristics of each psychological age. Without these considerations, it is impossible to propose effective routes to guaranteeing the harmonious development of the children.

The preoccupation in Colombia that the psychological developmental needs of children at the preschool age are not being met only increases in the case of children with disabilities. This is also the case for populations that are socially and culturally deprived. In the case of the indigenous population, for example, children are submitted to the administration of standardized tests without considering their context of cultural diversity. In the same way, the policy of educational inclusion (Law 361 of 1997 based on articles 13, 47, 54, and 68 of the National Constitution of Colombia) proposes the integration of children with different disabilities into the classroom (29). This integration frequently ends up being simply physical (the children are in the classroom) without real inclusion in collective activities.

As concrete cases, children with Asperger or Down syndromes can be mentioned. They are included in the regular classroom in the educational institutions where the symbolic development evaluation protocols were applied. However, their particular needs are not considered either. Rather they are initiated into activities of reading, writing, and mathematics without having previous preparation. Beyond the fact that they are not appropriate for the psychological age of these children, these activities are done mechanically and repetitively. That is, despite the fact that Document No. 10 cites Vygotsky to justify the policies of educational integration, the methods that predominate are based on behaviorism that is limited to stimuli and reactions or on operant conditioning that hopes that certain habits will be acquired through repetition in identical conditions to all the elements of the tasks presented. For example, it was found that the educators of the children in the preschool classroom gave the children vowel, tracing, and number worksheets.

Purely reproductive tasks predominate with an absolute absence of creative and intellectual tasks. In the worst of the cases, those children that present some special condition in their development, and that are included in the regular classroom, are not considered to be part of the group. Instead, the educators isolate them and have them do any activity without any order or goal that might positively impact their psychological development. For example, they are told to do coloring, they are given cards, or they are left to do what they like in the room. In these cases, there is no kind of specific direction from the teacher that would allow the harmonious development of the child.

Frequently, the disabled population presents difficulties with object images, voluntary activity, and symbolic activity. For this reason, their sketches are completely disorganized and it is difficult for them to carry out actions with an object as a substitute. The only worry in the classroom is that they read and write. This is the case because there are no activities directed toward achieving, in a systematic and intentional way, objectives related to the formation of object images and symbolic function. Without the previous development of abilities related to object images and symbolic function, it is practically impossible that the children recognize words as objects of action, identify sounds in words, recognize a sound from a graphic representation, find meaning in a verbal statement, or check and verify their activity.

In Figure 1, the activity of a girl of 5 years and 11 months of age with Down syndrome is shown. The girl presents a poor oral development and problems with the regulation of her behavior. Actions with objects and toys are stereotyped, and the use of objects has the character of unspecific manipulation (i.e. it has no objectives). She does not communicate with her contemporaries, nor does she understand the meaning of several objects. The girl was asked to draw places in a city during the application of a symbolic function evaluation protocol. This task is part of the evaluation of the level of development of perceptual symbolic actions. In the execution, there is evidence of multiple perseverations (repetitions) graphically, loss of the objective of the task, and the drawing is unrecognizable.



**Figure 1.** Example of a drawing from a girl with Down syndrome.

Although much support in the form of repetition of the instructions, dialogic conversation, and an example were given, the girl was not able to draw the places. When she was asked, “what did you draw?” she replied “head”. The girl was not able to explain her drawing. This shows that this type of executions is still inaccessible for the girl. Meanwhile, the preoccupation in the school is that she recognize letters and numbers, be able to identify words and be able to write her name. What’s more, there is no consideration for the fact that, before the introduction of written language, the girl be able to express herself verbally, describe events, and explain situations.

In Colombia, even though play is mentioned as relevant in early education, this is not justified, nor is its relevance argued. No ways of introducing fun activities by specific levels are proposed. Nor are the minimum prerequisites for the activity to be accepted by the children in groups mentioned. There is no clear concept of “play”, and no differences or similarities between this activity and others used at the preschool age are set out. Frequently, any kind of individual or group activity performed by the children is called play without any analysis of its structure or content.

Regardless of the understanding of the concept of play, in practice the educators include achievements in their study plans that have to do with the recognition of letters, words, and numbers in an isolated fashion starting at three years of age. Worksheets of figures, letters, and words are demanded of the students senselessly and valuable time is lost that cannot be recovered. At this age, the child is not able to identify the purpose of these kinds of symbols. At three years of age, the child needs to develop abilities related to object actions so that they can identify particular and specific characteristics of objects: colors, forms, sizes, and textures. In this way, the child can begin to identify similarities and differences between them. The activities that are performed with objects at this age lead the child to consider the purpose of his or her actions: first together with an adult, and later, the child will have his or her own purposes and the use of the objects will no longer be chaotic or disorganized. If the work is done in this way, the child may develop abilities related to the actions of object substitution, something that is fundamental for the acquisition of symbolic function.

In some educational institutions, the Doman method is used. This includes the visual introduction of words from family contexts so that small children can learn to discriminate between words as soon as they learn to speak and use meaningful concepts. The idea is the children have a surprising capacity to learn and that, the smaller they are, the easier learning is for them. In other cases, it is said that



educators work from a skill-based standpoint that includes meaningful learning from constructivist theory, and letters are introduced from the child's name. Here, the child becomes a solitary explorer that does not know what he or she is looking for and constructs something along the way, without knowing how or why (29).

The activities mentioned above have, in reality, little to do with the importance of play that is talked about in the official documents. In none of the cases above is there any consideration of psychological age, neoformations, or central governing activities that guarantee the restructuring of the personality of the child and the proper development of neoformations in each psychological age. This is the same as the supposition that there is no assessment for the presence of the true indicator of the child's level of preparation for school (17). Before the child enters school, we recommend evaluating the child's psychological sphere from the standpoint of basic neoformations at that age: voluntary action, mediation of activity, imagination, personality, and symbolic function. At the same time, it is possible that the activities that are performed with much insistence in daycares are not the ones that guarantee the true psychological development of the child (17,29). This situation generates a lack of motivation and profound difficulties when it comes to reading comprehension and text production in the school stage.

In Colombia, the most frequently reported difficulties with literature reveal that 60% of the children that enter the school system have problems with reading and writing in the first stage. In 2013, the country obtained very low results in the PISA tests for all three areas assessed: reading, mathematics, and science. Of the 44 participating countries, Colombia had the worst results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The test was administered to 85 000 15-year-old students, 9 000 of them were Colombian (30).

#### **Possibilities for change from the cultural-historical standpoint**

It is possible to prevent these difficulties if intentional and systematic actions are carried out that are directed toward the psychological characteristics of each age. These characteristics were studied in depth by psychologists and followers of the cultural-historical standpoint and the activity theory (2,11,12,31-35). According to this way of thinking, the preschool age is not only a chronological period that has certain limits but an indispensable stage in psychological development that has its own content and structure.

To highlight the differences between this viewpoint and other possibilities, it is important to remember that, in

psychology, there are two theoretical points of view about the origin of child development. One of these points of view proposes that child development is determined by inheritance. The followers of this conception see the source of development in biology. They argue that as soon as the child is born it possesses a certain type of capacities (36). Evidently, teachers that recognize the innate character of development do not consider the formation of specific and particular abilities according to the needs of each psychological age to be possible. Rather, they simply hope that these abilities appear at some point in the child's life. As such, in this case, the educator is not responsible for the developmental process of the child.

Another point of view proposes that laws of a cultural nature determine development. This means that the child is not born with predetermined abilities, rather that these abilities are formed gradually over the child's life through the activities in which he or she engages. Here it is important to clarify that it is not the society in and of itself that impacts child development. The motive does not come out of nothing, or from nature, or from biology, or from society. The simple fact of saying the child is part of society leads to nothing. It means instead that even if objects or toys (that are part of society) are given to the child, by touching them alone there is no activation of his psychological development. For the motive to arise—that is, the content—participating in and doing activities is necessary. However, it is not a question of doing just any activity but activities that are part of each stage of psychological development. These activities change and evolve over the span of childhood and their course signals the child's passing through the psychological ages.

In his work, *The Problem of the Psychological Development of the Child*, Vygotsky determined psychological age as a relatively closed cycle that shares common traits of personality and activity of the child (37). In each psychological age, there are qualitative changes that constitute the basic criteria for identifying the developmental needs of the preschool child. The psychic and social changes that are produced for the first time in each age are determined in the most important aspects, the consciousness of the child, their relation with the environment, their internal and external life, and, in general, the entire course of their development in the given period. The development is mainly due to changes in the child's personality that accumulate and manifest as a new qualitative formation of an age (37-40).

In this same work, Vygotsky establishes, in the form of a proposal, the conceptual components of the structure of psychological age. This structure includes aspects like leading activity, which guarantees new psychological formations; the social situation of development, which describes the real

relationships that arise between the child and society in both the micro and macro planes; what is typical and atypical for each particular case; and the developmental crisis that allows the child to move on to the next age (37). The concrete psychological expression of these structural elements for a particular case or for the characterization of the optimal aspects of development in general constitutes the content of the preschool age. Table 1 shows structural elements and the content of the preschool age.

**Table 1.** Structure and content of the preschool age.

Approximate chronological age	Psychological age (reference to the child's age)	Leading activity (structure)	Neoformations
0-1 year	Infancy	Affective-emotional communication	Language, walking, child's sense of "self".
1-3 years	Early preschool	Play involving the manipulation of objects	Meaning of objects, words, and actions; independent personality of the child.
3-6 years	Basic preschool	Play involving thematic role play of social roles	Imagination, voluntary activity, symbolic function, reflective personality, broad cognitive motivation.

Source: (17).

The concept of psychological development from the cultural-historical point of view refers to the gradual acquisition of human culture, that is, the use of psychological tools (objects of culture) (37,43,42). The acquisition of human culture can only be achieved in the framework of instrumental psychological activity or operation with signs and symbols of diverse levels of complexity, depending on the developmental stage of the child (38,42). The cultural development influences the human faculties and becomes a critical process for the capacities of the child (37, 41-46). From this perspective, psychological development is conceived as a dialectical process that does not occur in a linear fashion. Rather it should be understood based on a new central formation that determines the psychological particularities of the child.

In this way, it is necessary to mention the importance of the accumulation of new types of actions and experiences that culture contributes. Small children do not have actions of their own. It is the other, the adult, who offers them actions with a determined object through the activities that are part of each psychological age. The development of the child depends on the adult, and on the activities that the adult directs. Even walking, talking, and eating are abilities that are developed if

the adult directs them in an optimal way; these abilities do not develop innately. The importance of the adults that surround the child in the regulation of his or her behavior, and the formation of his or her psyche, is evident (37).

For Leontiev (47, 48), the study of child development starts with the development of its activity. Some types of activity are governing, are fundamental for a period, and have an enormous meaning for the development of personality. For this reason, we should talk about the dependence of psychic development with respect to the leading activity. The leading activity allows the process of qualitative change at each age of development to present in two directions. The fundamental direction manifests itself from the primary changes of the group of vital relationships of the child within the circle of his or her activity, to the development of actions, operations, and functions. The other direction is marked from the reorganization of functions and operations to the development of the formation of complex activity in the child.

Due to the fact that abilities form and manifest themselves through activity, the problem of the contribution of preschool childhood to the development of all human aspects and abilities can not be solved without considering the comparison of the basic types of activities of preschool children with the types of activities that characterize later developmental stages (43). This means that the new psychological formations that appear in each stage of development change the psychic life of children and make the development of new formations in the following age possible. For this reason, a close sequential relationship can be established between the leading activities of one psychological age and those of the following one.

Vygotsky (37) established the social genesis of higher mental functions. Each higher mental function appears on stage twice during their development. First, the adult gives instructions to the child and the child carries out the task (interpsychic stage). Later, the child supports himself with his own external verbal language (extrapsychic stage). Finally, the child decides to do something in her thoughts and, this time, without the support of the adult (intrapsychic stage) (8). Unfortunately, this process is not taken into account in the educational environment and, frequently, children are left to do activities freely. It is believed, erroneously, that the children at some point in their life will follow instructions spontaneously, will consider objectives in their activities, and will develop the abilities that they need to face diverse situations and solve problems.

In psychological education, to reach optimal psychological development, we propose organizing activities taking into account the theory of interiorization. At first, actions are external

and later transform into internal ones. This transformation allows for the transformation of the psychic life of the human being (18,19). In this way, we can affirm that, to develop internal action, external action must be formed first, as Galperin proposes. This method is known as the stage-by-stage formation of mental actions. Initially, the child can perform a new action, adding numbers for example, by using only external objects and doing external manipulations with them. The final situation refers to the child being able to do the same action, but now mentally and as if it were automatic (but with understanding) (14). The first action is material. The last stage is, perhaps, no longer an action –though only representatively– but rather a thought of an action in which the initial sensorial content of the action becomes a faraway addressee. Meanwhile, the thought of the action appears as something purely psychic (13-15). In this case, the object action and the thought of it constitute the final rungs on the ladder of a single process, and, in their genetic succession, they sketch a picture of a transformation from a material process into a psychic process (19,20).

Thus, the cultural-historical approach introduced to psychology by Vygotsky offers a novel vision of child development. This vision implies the introduction of the theoretical concept of psychological age (16). The concept of psychological age does not necessarily correspond to the chronological age of the child in question. Psychological age of the child reflects the child's psychological state, her specific and particular needs, his real level of development reached, and her level of proximal development, that is, the still immature processes that are in the middle of a period of maturation (17).

The detailed study of the structure of the preschool age with an in-depth examination of its content was carried out by Vygotsky's followers in the second half of the 20th century. Some of the researchers that contributed to the content of the preschool age are: Elkonin, the theory of the psychological development of play; Salmina, voluntary activity and symbolic function; Obukhova, the content of the age; Venguer, intellectual development; Talizina, requirements for school preparation; Luria, the regulating function of language; and Leontiev, conceptual problems of development.

Precisely in this perspective is where it is possible to find a conceptual proposal for defining the activity of play in childhood. The leading activity par excellence of the preschool age is thematic role-playing. That is why it is important to offer children to participate in these kinds of games in the classroom every day during the three years of preschool education. Elkonin, with the theory of the psychological development of play, put forward the idea that thematic role-play is a social activity because of its origin and, therefore, its content is also social (11,44). This activity puts emphasis on the social functions that

are transcendental in the child development. In this play, the objectives and motives of human activity are modulated, and the norms of relations between people specifically.

This activity allows children to develop fundamental abilities for performing actions of substitution and representation, allows them to realize what they are doing and saying, and allows them to be conscious of their own behavior. It also requires that they follow instructions, organize activities with a determined objective, resolve diverse problematic situations, and develop a responsible personality, and all of this at the preschool stage. Thematic role-playing of social roles causes changes in the child's psyche, changes that make up the bases of school-age activity. In this type of play, the children learn to relate their own actions with those of others, because each child represents a role. The orientation toward contemporaries forms the children's social sense, initiative, the possibility of following the group, and of sharing feelings.

Thematic role-playing of social roles has an influence on intellectual development because the child learns to generalize objects and actions, to use the generalized meaning of a word as a basis for passing from external actions to mental actions. Thus, the child goes from thought to the manipulation of objects to thought with representations when he gives the object the denomination of the substitute. In this way, the object acts as an external support for the thought (5). Thematic role-play stimulates the ability for active communication because the child needs to express their wishes with respect to the thematic situation clearly. Also, the child needs to understand what the other children are communicating in order to continue participating actively in the sequence of actions. Another essential aspect that is acquired through thematic role-play is voluntary activity, something that is considered a central psychological formation for the preschool age by the followers of Vygotsky.

For Salmina, voluntary activity will reach optimal development only if the preschool stage is completed successfully. In other words, if the child has the possibility to participate actively in the collective with the group of children in thematic role-play (51). Through this activity, children have the possibility of better controlling their own behavior and of understanding their individual capabilities for planning and building. The voluntary character of the human psyche is related to the organization of attention, memory, the use of language, thought, and the affective-emotional sphere. Acquiring a voluntary and conscious character allows children to rise above the properties of the concrete situation, choose the stimuli toward which they will direct their attention, and to choose the objective of the entire process (52). For these reasons, it is considered that voluntary activity should begin its formation at the preschool age.

Furthermore, Salmina (53) considers that, when the child enters school, he or she has to have already formed the activity having to do with signs and symbols, substitution. Substitution refers to the use of substitutes that perform the same function as the objects that they are replacing. For example, in play, the child substitutes the horse for a stick and gallops with the stick as if it were a horse. Later, the child is able to represent a social role by considering its characteristics.

Obukhova (54, 55), referring to the content of the preschool age, proposes that the activity that guarantees the psychological development of the child is thematic role-playing of social roles. In the preschool stage, the development of new psychological formations should be the main objective of psychological work. This is achieved with the active participation of the children in the role-plays. As a result, the general psychological development of the personality of the children is achieved, not only a few isolated aspects of their psyches.

Venger (56) puts forward the idea that one of the most important tasks of education at the preschool age is the formation of capacities. In other words, the formation of the psychic qualities needed for a full command of the different types of activity and their successful completion. The capacities respond to the requirements of the activity. However, they do not respond to any type of activity but to the leading activity (play). The development of the leading activity that characterizes the psychological age of the child determines the appearance of new psychological formations.

For Luria (57) the regulatory function of language is fundamental because it is responsible for directing all of the child's activity toward a determined objective. In our opinion, the presence of the regulatory function of language can act as a positive indicator of the acquisition of voluntary activity at the preschool age. Luria highlighted that this function of language makes the inhibition of irrelevant stimuli possible, allows children to direct their behavior towards a goal, lets them concentrate on verbal instructions, check their activity, and control the elementary forms of direction. It is precisely this that characterizes a positive state with regard to the acquisition of voluntary activity at a preschool age.

All of the theoretical contributions mentioned here allow us to establish clear objectives for psychological development at a preschool age. An alternative that allows us to understand childhood development is Vygotsky's cultural-historical focus and the activity theory of Leontiev, Galperin, and Talizina. Vygotsky, as its main representative affirmed "education leads development". This point of view expresses that putting forward the problem of the identification of the conditions that guarantee the greatest possible effect on

development is indispensable. Therefore, in the classroom of preschool children, those activities that make psychological development in a complex way possible should be considered. Psychological development is understood as an active process that depends on the organization of the child's activities (11,39,42,58). Activity is conceived of as a form of expression and as a necessary condition for the manifestation of the human psyche. It is a process that unfolds over time, that is performed by subject, and that is submitted to a motive (17).

Therefore, a practical didactic objective arises that is related with a structural analysis of the content of the activity thematic roleplaying of social roles and with the possibility of its organization. For example, if the theme is "restaurant", emphasis is made on the content that, in this case, would refer to handing the menu to the guests, and each food would be represented with a symbol: soup with a triangle, fish with a rectangle, potatoes with a circle, etc. The waiter takes the order, the cooks prepare the food, the waiter deliver the food to the guests, the guests eat (gestures, sounds), the waiter hands the guests the bill to be paid, the guests pay the cashier, they say goodbye and leave the restaurant.

The content of thematic role-playing of social roles undergoes transformations over its course. The children begin to reproduce the actions of the adults with objects and with substitutes of objects. Later, they carry out certain actions, assuming the role because they take on the role that they are representing in a complex fashion. The actions become a medium from opening social relationships. Later, the children begin to subordinate themselves to the rules and to coordinate actions. In this way, the children's interest in playing and doing their role well grows. This can be seen in the lengthening of the time dedicated to the activity. If the children manage to play the role in accordance with their own internal rules—that is, if the result corresponds to the objective—maximum satisfaction can be observed, maximum emotional saturation (12). For this to be the case, the direction that the educator gives to the group of children from the start is very important. After, the children start to direct their actions as a group or individually.

In Mexico and in Colombia, programs have been designed that are based on thematic role play, the formation of drawing by stages, and reading and analysis of stories for work with the child population with successful results. These programs allow educators to offer the tools that children need to move on to the school stage without difficulties because they help children to acquire the psychological formations that correspond to the preschool age (21,22,59,60). The activity of thematic role-playing of social roles is highly motivating because it is part of what children most enjoy doing at this stage in life, and it allows them to generate the cognitive motives for developing conceptual abilities and abstract thought in the school stage



In Figure 2a, an example of thematic role-playing of social roles with third-grade preschool children can be seen in a private school in the city of Puebla, Mexico. There, the children have the possibility of doing thematic role-play every day from the first grade of preschool. In this educational institution, the children also have the opportunity to participate in activities of directed drawing, reading, and story analysis on a daily basis. Some expressions used by the children in this play session included: “the sculptor made really pretty figures”, “the cashier was nice”, “the turns help us to have an order for buying a sculpture”, “the customers found their turn well”, “a sculptor should pay more attention to answer the guests’ questions”.

In Figure 2b, children in a third grade of preschool class in a district school of the city of Bogotá, Colombia where doctoral research for favoring the development of symbolic function through the participation of a group of 20 children in thematic role-playing of social roles can be observed.

In Colombia, all urban dwellings are assigned a “stratum” number that indicates their relative quality on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the lowest quality and 6 being the highest. By extension, this system is widely used in Colombia to refer to the relative economic condition of urban Colombians, with 6 referring to the most wealthy and 1 referring to the poorest citizens.

So the children belonged to social strata 1 and 2 and had diverse states of psychological development —17 regular children, 2 girls with Down syndrome, and 1 autistic girl—. Some of the expressions used frequently by the children included: “this game is really fun”, “what are we going to play tomorrow?”, “I want to be the doctor”, “I want to be the patient”, “we want to play more”, “we want to play a lot every day”, “I was the cleaning man and it went pretty good”, “I put the open and closed signs on the patients”.



**Figure 2a.** Theme: “The sculptors”.



**Figure 2b.** Theme: “The veterinary clinic”.

**Figure 2.** Examples of activity during the participation of preschool children in the thematic role-playing of social roles activity.

In the thematic role-playing of social roles, constant elements can be identified that allow for the analysis of the play and help us to propose a practical methodology for its introduction and procedures, as is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Elements and structure of thematic roleplaying of social roles.

Elements	Structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme (plot): What is the social situation</li> <li>• Roles (characters): Who participates?</li> <li>• Content: What happens?</li> <li>• Materials: What will be used?</li> <li>• Symbolization: How is it regulated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infancy Proposal of a concrete theme for the play.</li> <li>• Choosing the roles at random, wishes of the participants, suggestions or distribution according to some criterion.</li> <li>• Analysis of the content of the game. What does (or doesn't) each participant do?</li> <li>• Media: What do we need (or don't need) to play?</li> <li>• Checking and taking stock of the activity of the game. Who of all of us did well or poorly? What do we need to do to make the play better?</li> </ul>

Source: adapted from (17).

At the preschool age, the main activities that contribute to the children's development are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Activities that contribute to development at the preschool age.

Type of activity	Target neoformation
Thematic role-playing of social roles	Imagination, voluntary activity, reflective activity, broad cognition, symbolic function, personal sense, compassion.
Play with rules	Responsible personality, voluntary activity.
Active play	Voluntary activity.
Board games	Voluntary activity, symbolic function.
Directed drawing	Internal images, symbolic function.
Story analysis	Reflective activity, responsible personality, sense of morality.
Story dramatization	Imagination, voluntary action, reflective activity, broad cognitive motivation, symbolic function.

In this way, it can be affirmed that thematic role-play can guarantee the preparation of children for school studies. It involves the gradual development of voluntary activity, imagination, reflection, positive personality, and broad cognitive motivation, as Talizina (2,49) and Solovieva and Quintanar (17) have argued.

### Final thoughts

There is a lack of spaces for reflection that allow for a profound understanding of childhood development at a psychological and educational level. It is necessary that reflection be oriented toward the activities that make the optimal development of children at the preschool age possible so that thematic roleplaying of social roles may take up the place that it deserves in this area. For this to occur, the collective efforts of governmental and educational institutions, and of researchers are needed. To research thematic roleplaying of social roles, it is necessary to analyze the stages of its acquisition, together with the elements that are essential for the preparation for school. These elements can be introduced through this activity. In this way, activity becomes an object of psychological study as a process that is characterized by its transformations (41,47). These transformations allow us to profoundly understand childhood development, and to generate changes in children's psychic life and, as a result, in the conception that the children have of themselves and of the social and cultural world. Upon entering into direct contact with objective reality, and subordinating themselves to it, the activity transforms, it becomes richer, and, in this enrichment, the product of development crystallizes (31,61-64).

It should be understood that childhood development might be benefited simply from the in-depth structural consideration

of the activities in which the children participate and of the pathways for their optimal organization. If these activities are chaotic, the development of the children will have negative consequences. However, if these activities are organized intentionally and systematically, they will better contribute to the children's optimal development. In this way, the children will have more and better opportunities to actively participate in society and culture. Scientifically organized education from the earliest of ages avoids the appearance of negative traits during childhood development, something that is frequent in conditions of spontaneous education (65).

In particular, it can be affirmed that the cultural-historical viewpoint and the activity theory have made valuable theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions to the understanding of childhood psychological development and, as a consequence, to educational work in the classroom with preschool children (29). Education should be seen as an area that is related to the theoretical and psychological postures with regard to development postures and a scientific justification of the methods that are proposed in preschool education. To educate children systematically and with defined objectives, knowing the laws of psychological development and the characteristics of this process in the different periods of life is indispensable as a back-up for educational work (66).

Upon identifying the characteristics of psychological development of the children in the preschool classroom, the direction necessary can be offered according to the leading activity in force. Thus, for example, the educator should introduce dialogues with different types of questions in order to help the children produce, little by little, verbal responses. These actions help the children to develop a sense of flexibility in their esthetic perception of the world, to construct arguments, and to be more reflective and critical in a range of situations. What's more, this helps them to prepare for learning written language when they enter school.

The psychological formations of the preschool age are developed in a complex, and profound fashion. They are considered adequate only if the children have the possibility of participating actively in leading activities with the guidance of an adult. Therefore, in the educational context, we believe that there is a need to find novel methods that allow important contributions to be made to the field of childhood psychological development and the way children learn at school. The activity that we have highlighted here for the preschool age is thematic roleplaying of social roles, because it contributes to the development of a reflective personality, to verbal and non-verbal communication, to coexistence as part of a group, to problem solving (cognitive and emotional flexibility), independence, the assimilation of moral norms,

and symbolic development as intellectual preparation for school and the enrichment of notions of the life that surrounds them (17). Here, an indicator of positive development is the child's interest for the actions and attitudes of adults.

If there is a desire to contribute to the education of better, more sensitive, responsible, and engaged human beings, children must develop specific and particular abilities starting at the preschool age. For this to happen, reflective educators with in-depth knowledge of childhood psychological development, and who direct intentional activities that are part of this stage of life, are needed. There is a need for educators who reflect on their educational and teacher practice and who work on research problems that have to do with childhood development in the classroom.

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