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## Intellectual disability in kindergarten: possibilities of development through pretend play

Juliene Madureira Ferreira<sup>a\*</sup>, Marita Mäkinen<sup>b</sup>, Kátia de Souza Amorim<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Universidade de São Paulo, Avenida Bandeirantes, Ribeirão Preto, Brazil

<sup>b</sup>University of Tampere, Akerlundinkatu 5, Tampere 33014, Finland

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### Abstract

In this study, we explored how children with intellectual disabilities engage in activities with peers through pretend play, and the effects of this on their development. We analysed video recordings of interactional moments of play activities, aiming to identify how regulations and (co)regulations of behaviour are constructed and carried out between peers with significant developmental differences. Our methodology was based on the Network of Meanings theoretical framework and micro-genetic analysis. The results revealed three important elements: (1) reciprocity in the dynamics of regulating behaviour; (2) improvement in the structure and development of play through interaction with others; and (3) the possibility of the child with the intellectual disability to lead the play, showing that cognitive aspects are not the main reference points for children to engage in joint attention\collective activities.

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### 1. Introduction

Studies in human development psychology have been, for the past century, an important guide for different areas of knowledge. These studies have based professional practices in education, health, and social spheres over the world, setting guidelines for the construction of practices and interventions. The relevance\role of play, especially pretend

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 44 9779956.

*E-mail address:* [Juliene.Madureira.Ferreira.X@student.uta.fi](mailto:Juliene.Madureira.Ferreira.X@student.uta.fi) / [juliene@usp.br](mailto:juliene@usp.br) / [julienemf@yahoo.com.br](mailto:julienemf@yahoo.com.br)

play, is one of the countless explored topics regarding the process of development of young children. Play has been identified as one of the most important activities of childhood (e.g. Kishimoto, 2002; 2012; Kishimoto & Vectore, 2002) and has been considered a *sine qua non* condition for human development (Ginsburg, the Committee in Communications & the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007). The knowledge about play base practices in kindergarten, preschool, and early years of elementary school, and are part of the daily routine of children in school (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004).

Due to the importance of pretend play, it was one of the foci of our research. In this sub-study, we are interested in the interaction between children when one of the children had an intellectual disability. In particular, the situations of pretend play were significant moments that led us to discuss human development and peer interaction in kindergarten.

Intellectual disability is usually recognized as one of the most difficult challenges to overcome in the implementation of an effective inclusive practice (e.g. Plesch, 2010). It could demand curriculum redesign, different practices, specialized intervention and, above all, a distinct comprehension of human development. Even with all the advances in the area and the knowledge accumulated over the past twenty years, there is still the need to explore the process through which children construct their culture and engage in social interaction. Moreover, we consider it important to look into how children construct a pretence and how, even with such significant differences in development, they share meanings in kindergarten, since play is a central element in the curriculum. Therefore, considering the challenge of inclusive education and the need to deepen our understanding on the topic, the aim is to discuss the possibilities of engagement and development for children with such disability in a mainstream context.

To achieve our purposes, three issues are discussed. The first is related to the challenge of understanding the process of imagination, abstraction, and pretence for children with intellectual disability. For this, we bring out the necessity of overruling the understanding that imagination is an isolated cognitive ability. We bring data that can help us look into the process of interaction where the play is constructed, and we argue that the emphasis on the dichotomy between cognition and emotions can no longer be applied.

The second point relates to the process of interaction itself and the affordances that ‘others’ (peers) could provide for the development of pretence in the setting of interaction. In that sense, we consider how non-individualistic perspectives or, other in words, an Enactive Account (Rucinska & Reijmers, 2014; Rucinska, 2015) or a Social Subjectivity view (González-Rey, 2015) allow new comprehensions of the phenomenon.

The third element pertains to our concerns regarding the unilateral view that dismisses the possibilities that children with intellectual disability can engage in and lead collective pretend play, due to a possible lack of specific cognitive and social resources among them. We believe that children with intellectual disability do not just participate, engage in, and construct meaning in pretend play, but also are able to lead the activity, even considering the intellectual deficits that are present in their condition.

For the construction of these arguments, we will start presenting, briefly, our theoretical path. Just after, in a proceeding section, we will present the methods used for the construction of the research corpus and the methodology for the analysis. This will be followed by the ‘Findings and Discussion’ section, wherein we will present the data and emphasize the contributions of the new approaches. To conclude, we will acknowledge the limits of our attempts and note our final considerations on the topic for future investigations.

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