

CHILDREN EDUCATION: AZOREAN'S MEMORIES OF THEIR CHILDHOOD PLAYING

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Abstract

This study aims at better understanding of people's memories, in the Autonomous Region of the Azores, concerning the importance of childhood play in their education. A few decades ago the people on these islands developed their games and toys from experiences related to some of the traditional local jobs and some aspects of life on the islands.

Through the people's memories is possible to learn more about the experiences they went through as children (future-adults) and how they acquired the educational and cultural basis of the group/society they now belong to. From an analysis of cultural resources of the childhood play of various generations (adults and elderly people) we aim to discover the educational potential of play in relation to children's development and education.

Data were collected through a questionnaire that was sent to several people from all Azores islands. Qualitative data was first content analyzed according to a system of categories, which resulted from both, quantitative and qualitative analysis of data collected through.

Of all the "best remembered games and play" there is a general preference for traditional games, although there is difference between the people from different islands, and also according to different generations and gender. Old people better remember playing with and enjoying construction toys with their family.

In this study we are able to conclude that in general childhood play was important in Azoreans people education "in particular in promoting the development of social and emotional skills.

Keywords: children education, regional culture of childhood, traditional playing

Introduction

The propose of this study is examine the importance of play in children's development and learning, in their early childhood and the first years of formal infant & primary schooling. We believe that play in this period, has a mediating role in education, which helps the motor development of children, helps them have greater control of their emotions and promotes interaction and cooperation with other children, as well as promoting future community involvement.

In fact, when we speak of educating somebody we intend to learn more about the regional culture of children's play. We belief that it is through these plays and games that children come into contact with the first forms of literacy and that through this they encounter 'essential' elements of their educational learning, including motor skills, cultural, artistic and social.

It is held by many psychology authors that children develop and learn through play, from the early forms of play such as role playing and abstract thinking, through to those games, which draw on their imagination and creativity by acting out of roles which establish the relationship of the individual within the social world, which are fundamental elements in their ability to adapt and change (Piaget, 1978; Vygotski, 1988; Gesell, 1995).

If on one hand, play is natural for small children allowing them to entertain themselves with childish games and acting out imaginary roles, then on the other hand, play is also about learning to win and lose and involving oneself in these self-regulated activities.

In fact, when Chateau (1987:14) wrote "a child who doesn't know how to play, is like a little old person, and will become an adult who will not know how to think" he underlined the importance of play in our childhood, as it gives us the chance to learn and self-develop in multiple dimensions, namely: emotionally, affectionately and socially.

The wealth of these games constitutes a “memory” of cultural images, which are fundamental in the accumulation of children’s knowledge, their socialisation and their involvement in the community. The recreational nature of an activity, as well as greatly enhancing the possibility of learning and education, contributes to the preservation of the culture and socialisation of a region.

For this reason, we attempt to understand the Azorean culture of childhood, through an inter-generational analysis, in that which concerns the recreational culture of their games and thereby proving that we are witnessing a tradition that is both aware of the dynamics of society and that integrates into it the “values of its cultural patrimony” – historical, utilitarian, material, symbolic and emotional (Merillas, 2003:45).

We believe that the different games and plays that the Azorean people played throughout their childhood may have been important, in establishing a true relationship, with their participation in cultural, sports, arts and recreational associations. In fact, as Simões (2006) points out, these associations are an alternative resource that can be turned to, for learning about different areas – cultural, artistic and sport, which have appeal in terms of leisure and social well being, as well as, in the spreading of the regional heritage.

Methods

From an analysis of cultural resources of the childhood plays of various generations (adults and elderly people) we aim to discover the educational potential of play in relation to children’s development and learning. We consider that these memories and beliefs about play are of great importance in adult life and bear a true relationship with people’s practices of recreational activities such as sports, arts and cultural activities.

The data obtained in this study was collected through completed questionnaires on the “memories of the population” regarding their childhood games in all nine islands (more than 1500 adults and elder people). The data, both qualitative and quantitative, was input into a SPSS 15.0 base of Windows. In order to process this information descriptive statistics (percentage of occurrences) were used. An analysis of the contents of the questionnaires was carried out in accordance with a system of categories, which had previously adopted (Condessa et al. 2009).

Results

The purpose of this study was to attempt to understand, through the response received by Azoreans` adult and older people, the significance that childhood play has in their individual and social education. After analysing the characteristics of the sample we can conclude that our sample, drawn from all nine islands belonging to the archipelago of the Azores is characterised by the fact that:

1. most belong to many associations (80.2%)
2. are mainly adults (72.1%)
3. are largely female (67.8%)
4. the majority of their parents were poorly qualified (fathers generally did manual work in agriculture and fishing - 58.6%); mothers were domestic workers - 78.6%)
5. a high number of people with a rural background (58.2%)
6. have a low level of education (55.3%).

When asked about the importance of play in their adult lives although most people agreed on the importance of play in their education (Table 1).

Table 1 – Azorean`s opinion about “the importance of play in their education”

Children education:	Did not response	Less importance	More importance
personal development	151	185	1411
	8.6%	10.6%	80.8%
socialization	259	127	1361
	7.3%	7.2%	77.9%
knowledge of traditions	316	285	1146
	18.1%	16.3%	65.6%
passing on of traditions	321	241	1184
	18.4%	13.8%	67.8%

From other data obtained we are able to conclude that in general the Azoreans believe that childhood play was important in their education, in the growth as an adult "in particular in promoting the development of some new learning, social and emotional skills".

In fact, namely in terms of their personal and social development there were a high number of favourable replies, were the most commonly given reasons are:

- a. socio-affective development (35.4 % of the replies);
- b. respect for childhood (29% of the replies);
- c. development of autonomy (17% of the replies) were the most commonly given reasons.

The importance of childhood play in terms of the ability to develop relationships – firstly, in terms of interaction with another or others in the group (35.5%) and then in terms of making friends with peers (26.6%).

In general, from the data that was gathered and analysed, we can conclude that there is a general belief that childhood games are extremely important factors in people’s education and development both as an individual person and as a member of society. Titiev (1967) referred to the educational role childhood plays, games and toys, from an anthropological perspective, pointing out that rather than merely being futile, their purpose is one of learning.

The Azoreans asked to comment, listed knowledge of cultural and social values (56.6%) and knowledge of childhood experiences (26.4%) in relation to the significance of play in the acquisition of experiences and customs; and more, perpetuating intergenerational exchanges (44.9%).

In terms of the different classifications of play and traditional games recounted in “*memories of the population*” we can list some of the numerous examples of activities recalled relating childhood games. These activities were subject to a “contents analysis”, in which the responses were organised and inventoried into general and specific categories (Condessa et al. 2009). The general category of play contained 5 items: nursery rhymes; activities using traditional toys; songs sang in a group or circle; traditional games and others games and plays (Figure 1). The more specific category of play it being much more specific about the nature of the activities and traditional childhood games and plays, and contained 9 items: activities and games with nursery rhymes and/or folk songs; construction games and toys; games and songs done in a circle or group; activities and games using fine motor skills; activities and games using gross motor skills; games with rules; role play games; games of chance and luck; other games and play (Figure 2).

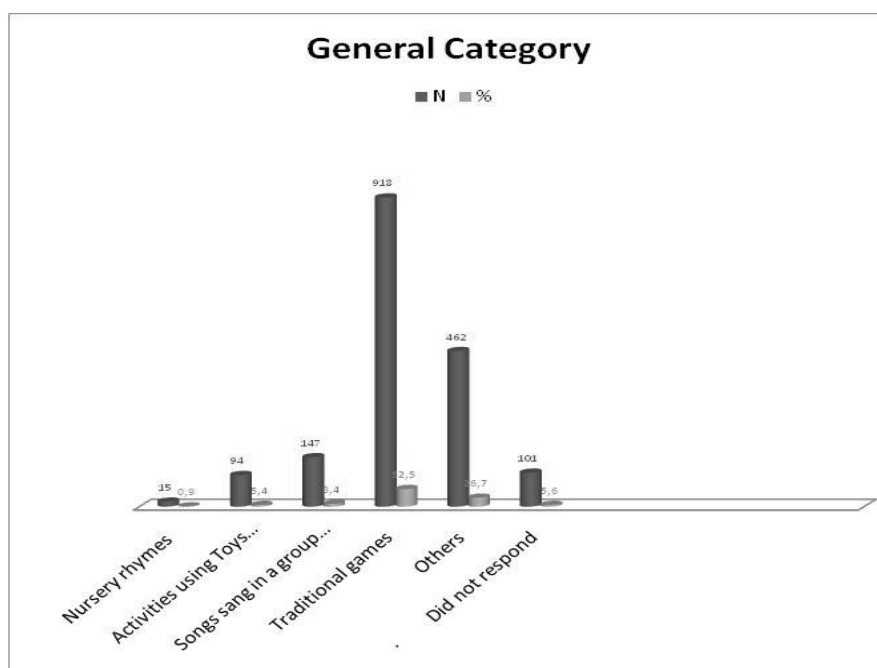


Figure 1 – Azorean Memories of Games and Play - General Category

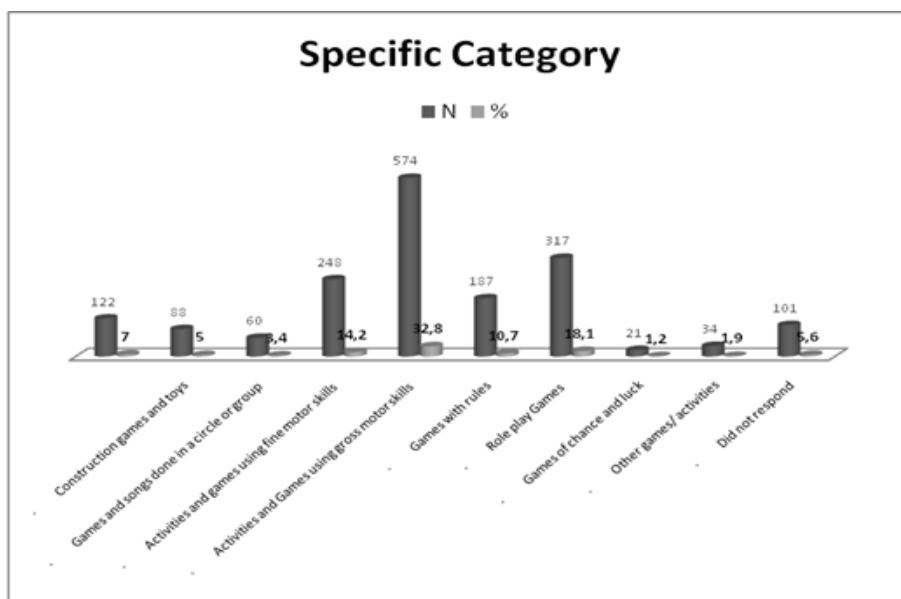


Figure 2 – Azorean Memories of Games and Play - Specific Category

The games which were best remembered, by the population were those which fall into the category of traditional games” (52.5%) and in particular those which were physically entertaining and involved various degrees of skill, agility and cunning, either without or without the use of small toys and objects, and were games in which players had to follow rules as well as being competitive. (there is difference between the people from different islands, and also according to different generations and gender.)

As well as lively, energetic activities using gross motor skills, such as races, chasing each other and hide and seek, which were those best remembered by both men and women (32.8%). Other types of play and games which involve the acting out of real life roles within the community (18.3%) more specifically imitating family activities, cultural, sports, religious and jobs, connected with the rituals and simple social activities of adults within the Azorean society. The games with rules (football, draughts, others) (16.7%) were those most often mentioned, followed by games requiring the use of finer motor skills (spinning tops, marbles, others) (14.2%). Activities using traditional toys are often mentioned (5.4%).

Memories of play differ from ‘person to person’ according to their personal characteristics – island group, age, gender and level of education. In fact, according to Lavado (2009:308) games and recreational activities are generally repeated and even emerge in stereotyped gestures, that is the groups that form to play are a group that has a sense of belonging together as playmates.

Of those individuals who chose traditional children’s games, we have focused here on only those who mentioned a preference for these types of games, we can confirm that in first place - men in fact put games and activities that require fine motor skills (25.4%; more 16.5% than the women) and games with clearly defined rules such as football (20.2%; more 14% than the women) which is associated with rivalry and masculinity. While the women of this sub-group put activities and games that require gross motor skills in first place (33.6%; more 4.1% than the men) whether accompanied or not by nursery rhymes and songs, such as skipping and elastics (9.5%; more 7.7% than the men).

When we analysed the replies we noticed that the largest dissimilarities were between games and activities that used fine motor skills, gross motor skills and games with rules:

- older individuals, person who lives at Western and Central Islands and those with a lower level of education put activities and games which require fine motor skills in first place (e.e. around more 8.5% than those who were younger);
- while adults, who lives at eastern Island, as well as those with secondary school education or higher education preferred activities and games which require gross motor skills (e.e. around more 11.6% than those who were older).

Cameira Serra (2001) is of the opinion that “traditional games” in practice appeal more to ordinary people than sport, and that this favours greater social cohesion within the community. Traditional games are both a formal and informal school for children and young people while they develop.

Making toys from basic, natural materials and odds & ends that were available at the time is one of the forms of play most remembered by both men and women, and especially by the elderly. Accordingly, due to the rural environment around them, the Azoreans recall games, which are closely related to life in the countryside. So making toys, mentioned by 88 people (5% of the total number interviewed), was referred to in the context of actually hand-making: little oxen carts, cars made from cobs of corn, balls made from rags, dolls made from corn husks, flutes made from reeds, rifles made from the tail root of the cob and dolls clothes.

The corn planted on the islands, was often used for making some of their toys (cars from “cobs of corn”; dolls from corn husks; others). As well as identifying an overlap between recreational and work related activities (Serra, 2001), as can be seen in the following commentary, it is clear that people best remember and enjoyed playing with hand-made toys with their family (Amado, 2007).

Conclusions

From the findings previously presented, we have concluded that:

- There is a generally held belief amongst the Azorean population concerning the important role that playing and children’s games play in the education of children and young people, in their preparation to become an independent and responsible adult and also a member of a society.
- These beliefs are compatible with the great importance of the activities that promote games and play (organised games and free play, with and without toys) that are aimed at socio-emotional development and developing autonomy.
- There are some similarities between the games and play best remembered in the traditional context (first place: traditional games) but there are also some differences between the people.
- Memories of play vary slightly according to the characteristics of the Azorean people: from different islands, men and women, adults and elderly people, individuals with more or less education.
- Games involving physical activity (running, jumping, chasing & escaping) are those best remembered by both men and women alike.
- Old people better remember playing with and enjoying construction toys with their family.
- Regarding spontaneous activities in ones free time, playing games with friends that involve being chased seems to be the most important aspect of play in childhood games.

Childhood is the moment when children more easily learn. However, and because the development of skills and understanding through playing is not or should not be limited to school, it would be extremely relevant to value the child's life. At such moments, there is their development in various behaviors in child, like: listening, singing, dancing, running, skipping, playing and creating.

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