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## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION?

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## Abstract

This study attempts to understand the process of children's acquisition of some basis such as educational and cultural as well as future social participation, through these experiences of

play. We believe that the different games 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 organisations.

Data was collected through a questionnaire that was sent to several people from all of the Azorean islands who had some type of institutional adhesion (cultural, sports, arts and recreational) (N = 880). The data, both qualitative and quantitative, were input into a SPSS 15.0 base of Windows and in order to process this information, descriptive comparative and correlative statistics was used.

The results state that there is a generally held belief amongst who are involved in recreational organisations concerning the important role that playing and children's games play in the development and education of children and young people. There are some similarities between the childhood play best remembered in the traditional Azorean context and these memories are consistent with the belief of the great relevance of the activities promote in their socio-emotional development and the development of autonomy childhood games are extremely important factors in people's upbringing and development both as an individual person and as a member of society.

**Keywords:** regional culture of childhood; development and education of children; association's adhesion

## Introduction

In this study, we intend to learn about the regional culture of children's play stemming from the belief that it is through these 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.

Huizinga (2003) analyses the cultural and social purpose of play from its most simple examples, related to the Greek concept of "paidia", through to the more complex examples concerned with the competitive nature of games held between different civilisations, related to the Greek concept of "agon". The first examples from children are the most natural and come about through the sheer joy of playing, which is linked to artistic development, including music, dance and nursery rhymes of our childhood.

We believe that play in early childhood has a mediating role, 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. 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, 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 socialization 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).

We believe that the different games that the Azorean people played throughout their childhood may have been important in

Table 1 - Differences observed in Age, Gender and Level of Education (Chi-Square Test)

	Reason for Joining a Group		Personal Development		Getting together with other people	
	$\chi^2$	P	$\chi^2$	P	$\chi^2$	P
Age			122.016	.000	94.842	.000
Gender	25.267	.001	17.308	.016		
Level of Education	76.367	.000	143.331	.000	119.555	.000

establishing a true relationship, with their participation in cultural, sports 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

The aim of this study was to attempt to understand, through the response received, the significance that childhood play has in the development and education of the individual and the role that it plays in ones involvement in ones community. A sample of 880 Azorean people were selected, from all of the islands, who currently are or have been a member of a recreational association, be it sport, arts or culture.

The data obtained in this study was collected through completed questionnaires on the "memories and beliefs of the population" regarding their childhood games. This tool contains an analysis of the following indicators:

A. *Biographical details*: Age; gender; level of education; place of residence during childhood; place of birth (island); place of residence during childhood background (rural or urban); socio-economic class;

B. *Membership in cultural, sports & arts associations*: community involvement in associations; reasons for joining the associations;

C. *Childhood memories*: during childhood playtime; best remembered games; periods of play and companions; most frequently used toys;

D. *Beliefs of the relevance of these games in adult life*: personal development; socialization; knowledge of traditions; passing on of traditions.

In order to process this information, descriptive statistics (percentage of occurrences), comparative statistics (Chi-Square test  $\chi^2$ ) and correlative statistics (Bravais-Pearson test - r) were used.

#### Results

Our sample is characterised by the fact that they belong to countless associations, are mainly adults (82.3%), are largely female (60.2%), have a low level of education (47%), had spent their childhood on the islands of the Azores, which is why there are a high number of people with a rural background and very few of them held a position of responsibility or power in the afore mentioned associations (25.4%).

Regarding the results obtained concerning the reason for membership in cultural, sports and recreational institutions, Simões (2006) confirms that involvement in associations is essentially the main motivation leading to learning in different areas - cultural, sport or artistic, as it appeals in terms of leisure and

social well being and in this way, serves as a stimulus for a range of different activities as well as the spread of regional heritage. From the data collected we can conclude that "acquiring skills and abilities" or more simply "having new knowledge and being able to do new things" in cultural, sport and artistic areas is the most frequently cited reason for joining the associations (36.7%) followed to a lesser extent by "being with friends" (18.9%), "a love of learning about and keeping alive our culture and traditions" (13.3%), and "community involvement" (13.2%). These thoughts and feelings are more clearly conveyed in the following comment:

*"When I was a kid was always eager to find out about new things and the outdoors and always tried to have as many adventures as possible. When I became an adult, I decided to become involved in these organizations so that I would be able to give back to others through them that what I was given".*

(Member of the Board of Directors of Ponta Delgada Naval Club, 40 years old, born in Lagoa, São Miguel Island, Hotel Industry Employee, 2008)

After analysing the data concerned with the frequency of responses in "reason for wanting to join a group", no significant differences are evident concerning age but the same can not be said about gender and academic education (Table 1).

There is an equal need to learn new skills and abilities for both men and women, the latter reveal that they are more willing to get together with other people (+11.1%) while for men, community involvement is more important (+10.3%). Those with a higher level of education also stated that their interest in community involvement was the main reason for joining different associations.

When asked about the importance of play in their adult lives, namely in terms of their personal development, that is, in their upbringing we could clearly see that there were a high number of favourable replies regarding this and only slight differences in opinion. Socio-affective development (27.1% of the replies), respect for childhood (19.6%) and development of autonomy (12.3%) were the most commonly given reasons. Although most people agreed on the importance of play in their upbringing, men in general and older people considered this to be of less importance. There was, however, a positive and significant relationship between those individuals who had a higher level of education and those who attributed more value to this factor ( $r=.292$  to  $p=.000$ ). The importance of childhood play in terms of the ability to develop relationships with others is agreed upon by both men and women; firstly, in terms of interaction with another or others in the group (64.4%) and then in terms of making friends with peers (26.2%). Greater differences were apparent between individuals of distinctly different ages, and the importance placed upon play in relation to others decreased

Table 2 - Categories of "Best remembered play"

General Category	%	Specific Category	%
Nursery Rhymes	0.5	Activities and games with nursery rhymes and/or songs	7.4
Activities using Traditional Toys	4.7	Building and construction games and activities	3.3
Songs sang in a group or circle.	8.4	Games and songs done in a circle or group	3.0
Traditional Games	59.6	Activities and games using fine motor skills	15.5
		Activities and games using gross motor skills	36.4
		Games with rules	13.7
		Role play games	17.3
		Games of chance and luck	1.6
Others	26.9	Other games/ activities	1.8

accordingly as age increased and increased with their level of education.

The Azoreans asked to comment, listed knowledge of cultural and social values (44.8%) and knowledge of childhood experiences (20.6%) in relation to the significance of play in the acquisition of experiences and customs. This point of view is in agreement with Huizinga (2003), who says that there is a fine line between that which is merely playing and that, which is serious since in the first phases of play, children play freely but over time a relationship is establish between their play and games and their culture.

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 (table 2). Regarding childhood hobbies, only 21.2% of those asked said that they had spent their free-time doing organised activities, while the majority said that they had spent their free-time with relatives and mainly with their friends doing freer activities (69.3%).

The games which were best remembered by the population, were those which fall into the category of traditional games (59.6%), 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.

As well as lively, energetic activities using gross motor skills, such as races, chasing each other (tig) and hide and seek, which were those best remembered by both men and women, games requiring the use of finer motor skills (spinning tops, marbles, stones,...) and games with rules (football, dodge ball, draughts,...) were those most often mentioned, followed by other types of play and games which involve the acting out of real life roles within the community (17.3%); more specifically imitating family activities, cultural, sports, religious and jobs, connected with the rituals and simple social activities of adults within the Azorean society. In this way, recreational culture here has evolved alongside the interpretation of the framework, which organises games of imitation and fiction (Brougère, 2002).

In other side, memories of play differ from 'person to person' according to their personal characteristics - age, gender and level of education. In fact, according to Lavado (2009), 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.

### Conclusions

From the findings previously presented, we have concluded that:

- There is a generally held belief amongst the Azorean population, who are involved in recreational organisations of sport, arts and culture, concerning the important role that playing and children's games play in the development and education of children and young people.
- There are some similarities between the children's games which are best remembered in a traditional context, whereby traditional games are put in first place.
- These memories 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.
- Games involving physical activity (running, jumping, chasing and escaping) are those best remembered by both men and women alike.
- Regarding spontaneous activities in ones free time, playing games with friends that involve being chased (tig) seems to be the most important aspect of play in childhood games.

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