"LOOK! I MADE IT MYSELF": WHAT DO CHILDREN TELL US ABOUT AUTHORSHIP AND CHILDREN'S AESTHETICS

"OLHA! FUI EU QUE FIZ!": O QUE AS CRIANÇAS NOS DIZEM SOBRE AUTORIA E ESTÉTICA INFANTIL

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Abstract

This study explores how children perceive their authorship and engage in discussions on childhood aesthetics. The research was conducted in a kindergarten in northern Braga with eighteen children aged between three and five years, participating in the educational project "A Place to Sound and Be Every School", led by the SOUND.BE group. The findings indicate that educational practices that encourage children's authorship and embrace childhood aesthetics create spaces for intergenerational dialogue, strengthening children's autonomy and creative expression. Moreover, the study highlights the need to reconfigure pedagogical practices to overcome adult-centric structures, making schools more democratic and inclusive spaces. This research contributes to a broader debate on valuing childhood in educational contexts, reaffirming the importance of recognizing children as legitimate subjects of knowledge and creation.

Keywords: Childhood Studies; children's authorship; children's aesthetics; social authors; ethnography with children.

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Resumo

Este estudo explora como as crianças percebem a sua autoria e participam em discussões sobre a estética infantil. A investigação foi realizada num jardim de infância no norte de Braga com dezoito crianças entre os três e os cinco anos, participantes no projeto educativo «A Place to Sound and Be Every School», liderado pelo grupo SOUND.BE. Os resultados indicam que as práticas educativas que incentivam a autoria das crianças e abraçam a estética infantil criam espaços para o diálogo intergeracional, fortalecendo a autonomia e a expressão criativa das crianças. Além disso, o estudo destaca a necessidade de reconfigurar as práticas

pedagógicas para superar as estruturas centradas nos adultos, tornando as escolas espaços mais democráticos e inclusivos. Esta investigação contribui para um debate mais amplo sobre a valorização da infância em contextos educativos, reafirmando a importância de reconhecer as crianças como sujeitos legítimos de conhecimento e criação.

Palavras-chave Estudos sobre a infância; autoria infantil; estética infantil; autores sociais; etnografia com crianças.

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Introduction

Childhood is not defined exclusively as a stage of development but as a space of symbolic production in which children establish themselves as active subjects endowed with a singular creative potential. Far from merely assimilating pre-existing content, their experiences reveal a curious and spontaneous perspective through which they reframe the world around them. In this continuous exercise of authorship, they not only construct subjectivities but also intervene in the shaping of reality, imbuing it with new layers of meaning and transforming it into a territory of expression and reinvention.

Despite the growing recognition of children as full social actors with rights (Sarmento, 2008), particularly within the field of Childhood Studies, a gap remains in understanding them as social authors, as well as the unique aesthetics of their productions. This authorship is often not fully realized, as adult interventions frequently affect the final outcome, shaping its expression and influencing how children's creative work is legitimized and interpreted.

The dynamics of alterity historically present in schools have been analyzed as key mechanisms for suppressing children's voices. Such an analysis can be conducted by problematizing concepts such as the "child's role", the "student's role", and the "rules of the school game" (Marchi, 2018; Sarmento, 2007). However, the concept of polyphony (Brito, 2025), formulated from an ontological and social perspective, proposes a broader understanding of the multiplicity of children's voices, recognizing them not only as actors but as social authors, with the creative potential to construct new perspectives on society alongside adult voices. In this context, the present study aims to examine how children in a kindergarten in northern Portugal perceive and interpret their own authorship and aesthetics.

Through an ethnography with children (Marchi, 2018), which enabled an in-depth immersion in the daily lives of the participants, the study was conducted within the scope of the SOUND.BE project, an initiative dedicated to providing education through the arts. A total of 18 children participated in this study, ten girls and eight boys, aged between three and five years. Observations took place throughout the 2023/2024 academic year, with weekly 45-minute sessions,

employing techniques such as participant observation and dense description of the interactions and experiences shared with the children.

The analysis and organization of the data were conducted based on Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling the systematization of the information gathered through observations and dialogues with the children, with the aim of identifying emerging patterns and meanings. The categories investigated and discussed in this study focus on two central axes: aesthetics and children's authorship. In this sense, the study forms part of a broader movement to strengthen educational practices that respect and value childhood, ensuring children's right to be recognized as legitimate subjects of knowledge, expression, and creation.

The contributions of this study centred on the need to implement pedagogical practices that place children's authorship at the core of promoting spaces for intergenerational dialogue. As evidenced by the children's own narratives, their engagement with and identification in educational processes are significantly enhanced when their perspectives are acknowledged and their status as authors is legitimized. In this context, the construction of a dialogic education, grounded in the recognition of children's autonomy and creative capacity, requires both structural and epistemological transformations. These changes not only reconfigure relationships within the school environment but also contribute to the development of a more equitable and collaborative society, in which multiple voices are genuinely valued.

The tensions between children's authorship and the "child's role"

The concept of childhood has been widely debated throughout history in an effort to move beyond an adult-centred perspective, which defines it as a transitional stage towards adulthood, characterized by dependency and presumed incompleteness (Prado, 2014). Within the school context, this reductionist view has constrained the recognition of children's voices, disregarding their ability to act creatively upon their own productions. As a consequence, children are often excluded from decision-making processes and the construction of knowledge, contributing to the invisibilization of childhood and, most importantly, of children themselves. This scenario reinforces an emphasis on children's positioning within a disciplinary model, linked to what has come to be known as the "child's role" (Marchi, 2018).

The advancement of Childhood Studies, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, has reinforced the recognition of childhood as a social category of a generational nature, whose experiences are profoundly shaped by historical, cultural, and political dimensions (James & Prout, 2015). However, as Tesar (2016, p. 5) highlights that, "the struggles for its fulfillment and particularly of children's well-being continue, with growing concerns of economic exploitation of children and the complexities of childhood". This observation underscores that, despite theoretical and normative progress,

significant challenges persist in the field of children's rights, necessitating a continuous reassessment of policies and practices aimed at protecting and valuing children as legitimate social subjects.

The understanding of children as full social actors with rights has been strengthened in recent decades, challenging perspectives that have historically framed them as individuals in preparation for adulthood (Sarmento, 2008). This shift moves towards recognizing children not as mere recipients of external influences but as agents capable of shaping their own experiences and meanings. James and Prout (2015) argue that childhood should be seen as an active social category in which children exercise autonomy and contribute to cultural and social dynamics. Similarly, Qvortrup (2011) emphasizes that childhood cannot be reduced to a transitional stage but must be recognized as a social phenomenon with intrinsic value, in which children play a decisive role in producing and transforming the contexts in which they are embedded.

In this regard, the school, as an institutionalized space for socialization and learning, plays a central role in the articulation between the "roles of student and child" (Marchi, 2010 and Sarmento, 2011). According to Sarmento (2011, p. 588), "with school, the child assumes the status of a social being, subject to an intentional process of transmitting commonly shared, politically defined values and knowledge, and an explicit target of public policies". However, while the "child's role" has historically been associated with a position of subordination to adults, governed by adherence to rules and the acquisition of formal knowledge, the "student's role", by contrast, encompasses a broader range of social, playful, and cultural experiences that extend beyond the confines of schooling.

Sarmento (2011) argues that the "student's role" arises from the need to understand the ways in which children construct their interactions, exercise their autonomy, and demonstrate their competencies, even though these processes are, to some extent, shaped by normative structures. In this regard, the author highlights that this role is not only refined but also continuously re-inscribed within the configuration of a renewed normativity of childhood.

Within this understanding of the role assigned to the image of the child in the school environment, Marchi (2010) highlights that, beyond the conceptions of these roles, the "rules of the school game" also come into play. As the author points out, these rules constitute a set of explicit and implicit norms that guide children's behaviour within the school setting. In her words, "being a 'good child' is not only about assimilating knowledge but also about being willing to 'play the game' of the school institution and to take on a role that reflects both conformity and competence" (Marchi, 2010, p. 191). Thus, the rules of the school game shape the pupil as a "native of school culture", enabling them to perform their role effectively without disrupting the institutional dynamic.

For actions to be reinterpreted and effectively implemented, particularly in educational and social contexts, researchers in the field of Childhood Studies have questioned the way certain concepts have been approached. Rather than focusing

solely on the child's individual autonomy in constructing their rights and social experiences, increasing emphasis has been placed on the importance of dialogic interactions between children and adults. In this sense, children's right to be heard cannot be understood in isolation but rather as the outcome of relational dynamics grounded in interdependence.

This approach advocates for a critical reassessment of traditional conceptions of participation and agency, moving away from perspectives that confine them to individual attributes. Instead, it emphasizes a relational understanding in which children's rights is established through interaction with adults, institutions, and society. In this regard, the notion of children's co-authorship and the recognition of children as social authors emerge as central elements, challenging adult-centric structures and fostering the creation of collective spaces where different generational voices come together in the formulation of more equitable practices and policies.

Children's authorship in school: aesthetics, creation, and pedagogical challenges

To understand children's authorship as an integral part of childhood cultures, it is essential to break away from the traditional logic of reproduction, "which positions children as recipients of educational policies and pedagogical practices designed by adults" (Sarmento, 2007, p. 19). In this regard, by analysing the school context, this study aligns with a paradigm that envisions education as a space for valuing children's autonomy and authorship. Thus, the research contributes to a broader debate on the ongoing need to reconsider how children's rights can be constructed in interaction with adults, recognizing children's active participation in shaping their social and educational experiences.

Recognizing children's authorship and autonomy as essential components in creating a meaningful and inclusive educational environment represents a crucial shift in perspective. In this context, authorship refers to the child's ability to interpret, create, and reframe the world around them, while autonomy is directly linked to their capacity to make decisions and actively participate in educational processes (Hardman, 2001). Thus, for schools to foster the development of these dimensions, it is necessary to promote an environment that enables dialogic experiences, where children have the opportunity to express their ideas, make decisions, and engage actively in the construction of knowledge.

The school, as a social space dedicated to education and learning, plays a fundamental role in valuing children's authorship. This concept goes beyond the mere expression of children's voices by acknowledging the depth of childhood cultures and emphasizing their competence to influence, create, and reinterpret educational experiences. For children's authorship to be effectively nurtured in the school environment, a transformative process is required—one that involves both the reconfiguration of pedagogical practices and a shift in the dynamics of interaction between educators and pupils. In this regard, it is crucial to recognize

children not only as rights holders but also as social authors endowed with critical and creative capacities, capable of actively shaping the contexts in which they are embedded.

Pedagogical approaches such as project-based pedagogy, investigative learning, and dialogic education provide fundamental guidelines for creating environments in which children are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active protagonists in the construction of understanding (Freire, 1996). In this context, it is proposed that spaces be developed where children can express their own perspectives and engage in ways that align with their experiences and subjectivities. This approach challenges traditional views that reduce children to subordinate subjects or position them as distant from an educational process that is adult-centred and unidirectional.

The realization of children's authorship within the school context encounters deeply rooted structural and cultural challenges that hinder its full materialization. A significant obstacle lies in the persistence of hierarchical dynamics within educational institutions, which limit children's active participation in pedagogical processes. Conventional conceptions of childhood's role in schools often lead to practices that inhibit children's creative and expressive capacities, silencing their authentic and autonomous cultural productions (Hardman, 2001). Conversely, by recognizing children's authorship and validating their ability to make decisions and express their ideas, stories, and narratives, a conducive environment is fostered in which they become authentic subjects, more confident and aware of their existence in the world.

Another essential aspect for the full realization of children's authorship within the school context lies in the indispensable appreciation and recognition of children's aesthetics, understood as a distinct and unique field, separate from adult aesthetic expressions. Such recognition requires a profound reflection on the particularities of this aesthetic, which manifests in creative and expressive forms deeply influenced by children's experiences, lived realities, and subjectivities, as well as a willingness to listen to what children themselves articulate about their own conceptions. Thus, the establishment of school environments that foster genuine participation and continuous dialogue becomes the foundation for a profound redefinition of the educator's role.

The children's aesthetics, as manifested in various creative activities, provides a rich source of insights into how children perceive and interact with the world, transfigured within children's cultures. "These are modes of monitoring that are specific and genuine" (Sarmento, 2007, p. 25), which significantly contribute to the process of constructing their knowledge and identities. By recognizing and valuing these aesthetic productions, schools not only validate children's authorship but also pave the way for an education that respects and enhances the authentic expression of children's subjectivities, enabling them to perceive themselves as cultural and creative agents capable of transforming their realities.

In everyday school life, children experience a continuous process of constructing and refining their autonomous competencies, gradually developing the ability to make informed decisions and to act consciously in the world around them. This process is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of situations in which children encounter and overcome challenges, whether through "minor decisions", which relate to the formulation of immediate solutions and strategies to address specific problems, or through "major decisions", which involve managing their own experiences, making learning choices, and resolving more complex issues that arise in the school environment (Moreira, 2005, p. 9).

"It is necessary to understand the process of decision-making/problem-solving to know how to act, so that we can intentionally and calmly direct our actions" (Moreira, 2005, p. 18). In the context of children's authorship, this process becomes a fundamental aspect of their daily practices, manifesting both in their interactions with peers and in their exchanges with educators. These dynamics emerge in multiple moments, from small acts of negotiation with classmates to collaboration with adults, with the ability to make decisions and solve problems serving as one of the key foundations of children's autonomy.

In the context of reinterpreting the role of educators, valuing children's active participation in the classroom requires a significant shift in the power dynamics established within the school environment. This change goes beyond merely listening to children's opinions; it seeks to create an environment in which children become transformative agents in the educational process. For this to occur, their contributions mustn't be merely heard but genuinely influence and shape the development of the curriculum and the pedagogical trajectories adopted.

Additionally, the creation of environments conducive to children's authorship within the school plays a crucial role in promoting their authentic and autonomous expression. Experimental spaces, such as creative ateliers and interdisciplinary projects integrating diverse forms of expression - including drawing, music, theatre, and writing - offer multiple channels through which children can explore and articulate their ideas. This approach fosters a learning process that extends beyond the mere reception of content, encouraging children's authorship as active participants in knowledge construction. In this process, the role of educators is essential - not only as transmitters of knowledge but as partners in the learning journey, collaborating with students in the collective construction of knowledge (Cunha, 2020).

In this regard, ensuring children's authorship within the school context constitutes an essential ethical and political commitment, as highlighted by the aforementioned authors, which necessitates overcoming exclusionary pedagogical practices. This shift requires the creation of an educational environment founded on active listening, mutual respect, and the appreciation of children's experiences and knowledge. The transition from a traditional, hierarchical model to a more collaborative approach not only reinforces children's autonomy but also fosters the

development of critical, creative, and participatory competencies, fundamental for shaping individuals who actively engage in the transformation of society.

Methodology and research field

This study is situated within the field of qualitative research and is based on ethnography with children (Marchi, 2018). Its primary objective is to investigate how children conceive and interpret their own authorship in creative laboratories dedicated to experimentation and expression through multiple artistic languages. Assuming that children are active social agents, endowed with the competence to construct meanings and exercise their authorship within the school environment, the research adopts a methodology that prioritises prolonged immersion in educational contexts. Furthermore, data production is guided by strategies that ensure the centrality of children's voices in the investigative process, recognising them as protagonists in the production of knowledge (Marchi, 2018).

The research was conducted with a group of 18 children enrolled in a kindergarten located in the northern region of Portugal. This institution is part of a school cluster that stands out for encompassing a heterogeneous territory, comprising urban, semi-urban, and, to a lesser extent, rural areas, reflecting significant sociocultural diversity. Regarding infrastructure, the kindergarten has two classrooms, a teachers' room, a kitchen, a cafeteria, and a multipurpose space. Additionally, its outdoor areas include both a covered and an uncovered section, both equipped with a playground, providing an environment conducive to interaction, play, and children's development.

The observations conducted in this study focused on extracurricular activities promoted by the SOUND.BE group as part of the project entitled "A Place to Sound and Be in Every School". This educational initiative, grounded in arts-based education, serves various educational institutions, including nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools located in the districts of Braga, Vieira do Minho, Guimarães, and Porto. Its pedagogical approach is based on artistic experience as a process of free and creative experimentation.

As highlighted by Yara, the project coordinator, "'A Place to Sound and Be in Every School' was conceived precisely "because it is a place where we try, as much as possible, not to say no! Can we do it with a blue pencil? Yes! Can we use markers? We can! We thought of this because children are always seeking validation, having spent their whole lives hearing 'no'. So, the project arises from the desire to create a space where we say yes as much as possible. Of course, we also say no, because we need to establish limits, structures, and rules so that children can truly enjoy the SOUND.BE space. But it is a place free from the pressure of tests, results, assessments, and exams, which ultimately constrain artistic learning".

The observed classes focused on two key strands of the educational project: the Creative Laboratory and Music classes. According to Carlos, another project coordinator, "we believe that art is fundamental to children's development. Not only

music but all forms of art. That is why we created the Creative Laboratory – so that children can engage in artistic creation based on their own creativity and beliefs".

The research was conducted through prolonged field immersion throughout the 2023/2024 academic year, covering the period from September to June. Observations took place in the afternoon session, following the conclusion of regular school activities. These sessions were held weekly, lasting 45 minutes each, enabling continuous and in-depth monitoring of pedagogical dynamics, interactions among children, and the development of practices related to children's authorship within the educational context under investigation.

Regarding the research participants, the study was conducted in a class comprising 18 children, ten of whom were female and eight males, aged between three and five years. It is noteworthy that the school cluster to which the kindergarten is affiliated exhibits significant cultural diversity, accommodating children of various nationalities. In the specific context of this study, the distribution of nationalities among the participants included 15 Portuguese children, two Brazilian children, and one Angolan child.

It is worth noting that the diverse nationalities of the participants in this study add an intercultural dimension to the analysis. Although nationality is not the main focus of the research, the presence of such cultural diversity made it possible to observe subtle variations in the forms of aesthetic expression and in the modes of authorship assumed by the children, shaped by distinct cultural repertoires and social experiences. This diversity enriched the understanding of children's creative practices within the context of the project. Table 1 below provides a detailed description of the research participants.

Table 1.
Description of the research subjects

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality
Tóni	male	5	portuguese
Kiko	male	4	portuguese
Bia	female	5	portuguese
Pipo	male	4	portuguese
Nini	female	3	portuguese
Sara	female	4	portuguese
Chico	male	4	portuguese
Duarte	male	4	portuguese
Pepa	female	5	brazilian
Clara	female	4	portuguese
Lia	female	3	brazilian
Diogo	male	4	portuguese
Kalu	female	5	angolan
Salvador	male	4	portuguese
Matilde	female	4	portuguese
Dinis	male	5	portuguese
David	male	5	portuguese
Diana	female	4	portuguese

Source: prepared by the author, 2025.

As part of the data collection process, the research was guided by participant observations, combined with the approach of thick description (Geertz, 2009), enabling an in-depth analysis of the moments experienced in the field. To complement this process, audio recordings, photographs, and videos of the activities conducted were utilised, ensuring a detailed documentation of the observed interactions. These methodological procedures aimed not only to capture the dynamics established between the children and the educator but also to understand the interpersonal relationships among peers and the children's perceptions of pedagogical practices related to authorship. In this way, the study sought to ensure a broad and contextualised understanding of the investigated phenomenon, considering the complexity of the experiences and narratives emerging within the educational setting.

For the categorisation and interpretation of the data, Thematic Analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was adopted, allowing for the identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns in the interviews and observations conducted. This analytical approach enabled the construction of investigative categories aligned with the conceptions of children's authorship expressed within the context of early childhood education. Thus, the methodological procedures employed facilitated an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding children's authorship in

pedagogical practices. In the following sections, the data collected will be presented and analysed, highlighting the key empirical findings and the emerging reflections arising from the investigation.

"It's beautiful because I made it": reflections on children's aesthetics

During one of the creative laboratory sessions in March, while engaging in a painting activity, it became evident that the educator's presentation of works by the artist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) aimed not only to encourage children to develop their own creations but also to foster reflections on their aesthetic perceptions through established dialogues. To this end, images of the artist's work were provided in various formats and dimensions, enabling an initial encounter with his artistic production.

Additionally, the educator contextualized Pollock's trajectory, explaining his significance in the artistic field and his participation in exhibitions worldwide, always ensuring that the discussion was suited to the children's age. However, even after observing Jackson Pollock's paintings, the children's initial inquiries focused on the sense of freedom in his artwork, with remarks such as: "It looks like he threw all the colours onto the paper!", "The splashes look like a rain of paint!", "I think he painted while he was dancing!", and "If I shook my brush like this, I could make one just like it too!".

Given the multiplicity of ideas formulated by the children, particularly regarding their understanding of the artist's freedom in his works, the educator took care to respond to each of their inquiries. After addressing various curiosities, the discussion was then steered towards the children's perceptions of the presented images and the painter's distinctive pictorial style. In this context, Sara expressed her interpretation by stating, "I see an ink octopus hiding here", reflecting what she perceived in the painting. Vicente, in turn, highlighted another aspect of the artistic production, remarking, "The colours aren't neat; they mix as if they're chasing each other!", emphasizing the artist's chromatic choices as a distinctive element of his aesthetic.

With each new intervention from the children, the educator sought to encourage deeper reflections, prompting them to consider their aesthetic perceptions of the artwork and exploring the reasons behind their appreciation or lack thereof. Amid this interaction, Diogo expressed his opinion, stating that, although he liked the images, he believed the composition would appear more harmonious if it featured a single combination of colours.

In his own words: "He mixed red and blue strokes. It would look nicer if they were red and green, like the Portuguese flag". In response to this observation, the educator encouraged Diogo to reflect on how he would structure the artwork if he were the artist. The boy then replied: "Since I am from Portugal, I would make green and red strokes, some big and some small. Then Pepa could make green and yellow ones because she is Brazilian".

Upon hearing her peer's reasoning regarding the choice of colours in his artistic creation, Ana offered a new perspective on the observed artwork. The child remarked: "I think he paints using all the colours that exist in the world. I would like to paint like that too, but I don't know how to make so many strokes with tiny dots". In response to this statement, the educator asked whether the students would like to create a painting inspired by Jackson Pollock's work, receiving an immediate affirmative answer. However, taking into account the aesthetic preferences expressed by the children, the educator emphasized that the aim was not to replicate the presented images but rather to conceive an original work of art – something never seen before. According to the educator's explanation, on that day, they would be the famous painters of the school and could create their artwork in whatever way they found most pleasing.

The methodology adopted by the educator highlights fundamental principles of contemporary Childhood Studies, particularly regarding the recognition of children as social authors, rights-holders, and protagonists in the construction of their own cultural meanings (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup, 2009).

By emphasizing children's autonomy in artistic experimentation, rejecting adult-centric normative impositions, and valuing children's aesthetics, the educator fosters a pedagogical approach aligned with the notion that children are not merely recipients of knowledge but rather active social agents, capable of interpreting, re-signifying, and transforming the world around them (Sarmento, 2003; 2004; Liebel, 2020). Furthermore, a particularly significant element emerged from the dialogue between the educator and Lara, as recorded in the field notes:

> While the educator was explaining the activity, Lara turned to her friend and confidently stated that her drawing would be "much more beautiful" than that of the painter herself. Amused, the educator joined the conversation and asked what made her so certain. Lara did not hesitate in her response: "Because when I draw, I do magic with the paints, and it turns out much more beautiful. Adults don't know how to do this magic. That's why children's drawings are more beautiful" (Field notes, 14.04.2024).

The recorded account provides an intriguing insight into how children, in this case, Lara, perceive artistic creation and assign aesthetic value to their own work. Lara's statement, in which she asserts that her drawing will be "much more beautiful" than that of the painter, highlights a child's perspective on art that is not solely based on conventional aesthetic standards but rather on the attribution of a magical and personal value to her practice. For Lara, the creative process is not an act of imitation or mere repetition of something pre-established; instead, it is a true "magic", something beyond adult comprehension, constituting an authentic and unique form of expression.

This perspective is highly relevant in the field of children's aesthetics, which is often overlooked or underestimated by an adult gaze that tends to evaluate children's art based on conventional or comparative aesthetic criteria. Children's

aesthetics, however, should be understood as a domain of free, creative, and autonomous expression, where value does not lie in technique or adherence to established standards but in the child's subjectivity and inventiveness. The notion of "magic" mentioned by Lara can be seen as a metaphor for this authenticity, for children's ability to reconfigure the world around them through their creations, recognizing their autonomous cultural production (Hardman, 2001).

Hardman (2001) emphasizes the importance of recognizing children as competent and autonomous subjects, asserting that children's cultural production should not be perceived as a simplistic or incomplete reproduction of adult art, but rather as a legitimate form of expression with its own logic and value. In this sense, Lara's statement, in which she asserts that "adults do not know how to do this magic", reflects the idea that children possess a distinct creative capacity – one that is not constrained by adult conventions or logic but is instead guided by their own sensibilities, shaped by their lived experiences and interpretations.

However, it is important to highlight how the adult, represented by the educator in the field notes, reacts with laughter to Lara's comment. This laughter can be interpreted as a form of minimization or even a lack of understanding regarding the depth and autonomy of the children's creative process. In this context, the issue of children's aesthetics is directly linked to the recognition of the child as an active agent in their cultural production – something that is often overlooked due to an adult-centric perspective on art. As Corsaro (2011) points out, the notion that children are merely passive recipients of culture, lacking the capacity to produce aesthetically on their own, delegitimizes their power to create culture. By failing to acknowledge the "magic" that Lara attributes to her creative process, the adult perpetuates a reductionist view of the child as a cultural producer.

It is essential to highlight that, throughout the entire activity, the educator maintained an attentive and sensitive stance, ensuring that the children could express their ideas autonomously, without impositions or external directions regarding their productions. At a certain moment, Reinaldo asked: "Teacher, can I paint one color over another?", to which he promptly received an affirmative response. It was observed that the educator clarified any doubts raised by the children; however, no rigid rules were imposed, nor were their artistic experiments restricted.

Image 1. Children and their first artistic strokes
Source: Author's photograph, 2022. Image reproduction authorized.

The approach adopted by the educator in conducting the activity can be analyzed in light of Liebel's (2020) contributions, which emphasize the importance of recognizing children as protagonists of their own creative processes. Such recognition entails overcoming practices that confine childhood to the mere reproduction of values and aesthetics conceived within the adult world, thereby allowing for the emergence of unique forms of expression and meaning, inherent to children's cultures.

A relevant aspect to be considered in the debate on children's aesthetics concerns the meanings that children themselves attribute to their completed works. In this context, at a certain point during the activity, the educator suggests the idea of organizing a mural to display the finished artworks, allowing parents to appreciate them. However, this proposal elicits an immediate response from Clara, who expresses a different perspective: "Oh, no. I wanted to take my drawing home, keep it with me, and place it in my room next to my doll, which is also pink".

Clara's response to the educator, in rejecting the proposal to display her drawing on a mural and instead choosing to keep it for herself, highlights the importance of ownership and intimacy that children attribute to their artistic productions. For Clara, the drawing is not merely a final product but something deeply personal, which should remain in a private space alongside her doll, symbolizing an affective bond and a sense of belonging. This contrasts with the

adult's concern with exhibiting the artwork, reflecting a focus on external recognition – a practice that often disregards children's individual preferences.

Image 2. Completed children's artworks
Source: Author's photograph, 2022. Image reproduction authorized.

Clara's perspective also highlights a fundamental difference in aesthetic concerns between children and adults. While adults may value public exhibition as a validation of the final product, children tend to emphasize the emotional and intimate significance of their creations. This divergence suggests that, for children, the aesthetics of their work are not solely linked to social recognition but rather to their affective relationship with the produced object. This reinforces the need for pedagogical practices that respect these particularities.

Therefore, this dynamic reveals how children's choices reflect their autonomy over their creations, challenging the adult conception that aesthetic appreciation is necessarily tied to public display. The true essence of children's aesthetics often lies in a more private dimension, where the value of the creation is determined by the personal relationship with the artwork rather than by external approval.

"I created it from my own mind": how children perceive their authorship

The conception of children as social actors capable of questioning the hierarchical structures historically attributed to childhood has been widely debated in Childhood Studies. This recognition challenges adult-centric perspectives by demonstrating that children are not merely passive recipients of adult culture but active agents in the construction of knowledge and meaning. More recently, the

understanding of children as social authors (Brito, 2024) has been expanded, emphasizing their ability not only to reinterpret ideas and practices in different contexts but also to create and transform ways of thinking about society. In this sense, as they appropriate aesthetics in their productions, children reveal the beauty embedded in everyday life and assign new meanings to elements that, from a conventional perspective, might be considered trivial.

Based on the interactions observed in the Creative Laboratory, it was possible to understand the educator's approach to children's authorship, highlighting not only their encouragement of creation but also the recognition and appreciation of children's productions. In one of the lessons held in May 2024, the proposed activity involved the exploration of musical rhythms through percussion instruments such as castanets, maracas, and kazoos. The initial phase of the activity allowed children to freely choose the instrument that most captured their interest, emphasizing their autonomy in the creative process.

"What a cute instrument with a little cow face! I want to play this one!", exclaimed Matilde as she selected her instrument, drawn by its aesthetic appeal. José then made his choice: "I'll take the frog one", following his classmate's decision. Their enthusiasm sparked the interest of the other children, leading to the swift selection of castanets illustrated with animal figures. Subsequently, attention turned to the kazoos. "This one is for blowing, teacher! I want the pink one", explained Luna, while Pedro chose the green one. During this initial stage, it was evident that the educator allowed the children to interact freely with the instruments, without imposing rules or technical instructions, thus fostering a process of spontaneous and exploratory experimentation.

According to Yara, "allowing children to choose and make decisions is essential, and it will not lead to chaos. Perhaps this is obvious to some people, and that is a good thing. However, it is very common that, when distributing materials, children express a preference for a specific color or material, and often, to avoid confusion, teachers say, 'you get what you get,' which actually means 'I choose, so that no one gets upset'".

The educator's statement prompts reflection on the understanding that the opportunity to freely choose musical instruments highlights a fundamental aspect of children's autonomy development, as discussed by Moreira (2005). By allowing children to select instruments based on their own aesthetic and sensory preferences, the educator not only acknowledges their decision-making capacity but also fosters an environment in which they exercise their agency in shaping their own experiences. This process aligns with the understanding that autonomy is not an innate attribute but rather something cultivated daily through concrete opportunities for choice and experimentation.

In this context, the selection of instruments goes beyond a mere mechanical action and emerges as a symbolic exercise of self-determination. By choosing specific sound objects, children not only express their individual preferences but also reveal their unique ways of engaging with their environment and peers. This

act of choice reflects an understanding that children's autonomy is constructed in practice, through everyday situations in which they are presented with alternatives and must make decisions.

Based on the prior selection of instruments and the free sonic experimentation carried out by the children, the educator proposed an individual musical creation exercise in which each participant was tasked with developing a rhythm using their chosen instrument. In a subsequent stage, all contributions would be integrated into a collective composition. To guide this experience, the song Paseamos por el bosque, performed by Eugénia Arús, was used as a musical reference, allowing each child to explore different forms of rhythmic accompaniment according to their preferences and musical intuitions. This process enabled not only experimentation and creativity but also the construction of a collective arrangement, in which individual expression was interwoven with group dynamics.

By allowing the children to freely select their instruments and create their own rhythmic sequences to accompany the song, the educator not only fostered creativity but also reinforced experimentation as an essential component of children's autonomy development. The absence of rigid guidelines in the musical construction highlights the perspective that art in childhood should be a space for exploration and invention rather than mere reproduction of pre-established models. Although the reference song had been predefined, the children's authorship and autonomy were preserved throughout the process of creating rhythmic structures.

An intriguing aspect emerged when, even before the educator had finished explaining the activity, the children with the maracas autonomously gathered in a corner of the room and spontaneously began playing a rhythm to accompany the song (Figure 3). When the educator inquired about their decision to distance themselves from the rest of the group, Chico replied: "Our band is going to rehearse here, teacher. We are the little eggs".

Image 3. Children rehearsing their rhythmic creation
Source: Author's photograph, 2022. Image reproduction authorized.

Children's autonomy in not only creating but also engaging independently in groups for musical performance demonstrates their capacity for autonomous cultural production, whether on an individual or collective level. This perspective aligns with contemporary approaches that value children's active participation in educational processes, recognizing their right to expression and decision-making within pedagogical practices. By taking a central role in their choices, children exercise their autonomy, articulating freedom and responsibility in shaping their own paths. Each decision they make constitutes not only an act of agency but also an affirmation of their individuality and authorship within the educational context (Brito, 2025).

Thus, recognizing children as social authors entails not only acknowledging their capacity for decision-making but also valuing their creative processes as legitimate forms of expression and cultural production. By making choices and creating based on their own perceptions, children demonstrate that childhood authorship is not limited to the reproduction of pre-existing models; rather, it constitutes a field of invention, experimentation, and re-signification of the world. Therefore, by ensuring spaces that foster their autonomy and creativity, the need for an education that not only respects but also enhances children's agency in knowledge construction and artistic production is reaffirmed.

Conclusion

This article highlights the urgent need for pedagogical practices that not only foster children's authorship but also recognize and celebrate the unique aesthetics of childhood, underscoring the necessity of significant transformations in the educational field. Such transformations extend beyond the mere reconfiguration of the school environment, reaching into the epistemological, cultural, and social

dimensions that underpin pedagogical approaches. The appreciation of children's voices, combined with the redefinition of the educator's role, emerges as a central principle in the construction of an education that transcends traditional structures, moving towards a truly democratic, inclusive model committed to the ideals of social justice.

The recognition of children as social authors necessitates a fundamental break with traditional educational models that perpetuate hierarchical and adult-centred relationships. By repositioning children at the heart of the pedagogical process, a conducive space is created for practices that foster diversity, inclusion, and innovation. However, the realization of this ideal demands a continuous and collective commitment from educators, researchers, and policymakers to reassess, rethink, and adapt their approaches, ensuring the integration of children as legitimate and active contributors to the educational process.

The redefinition of the teaching role, particularly concerning the recognition of children's aesthetics, constitutes a central element in the reconfiguration of pedagogical practices. By relinquishing the position of a mere transmitter of knowledge, the educator is called upon to become an agent who fosters spaces of experience that nurture children's creativity and authentic expression. Such a transformation requires the construction of a pedagogical environment where experimentation, dialogue, and active listening are not merely encouraged but embedded as foundational principles of the educational process. In this way, children's authorship emerges as a lived and continuous practice that permeates and guides all dimensions of learning, enabling children not only to participate but also to take a leading role in the process of knowledge construction.

Ultimately, the construction of a genuinely dialogical education – one that establishes itself as a space of exchange between adults and children, resonating with autonomy, authorship, and children's right to voice – is not a straightforward process but rather a demand for profound transformation in educational structures, epistemologies, and practices. This challenge requires, simultaneously, a reconfiguration of the understanding of what it means to educate and be educated, reorienting the educator's role towards critical thinking and the promotion of expressive freedom. This movement not only constitutes an immediate benefit for children but also extends as a commitment to the future of a more inclusive society, in which the voices of each individual are not only heard but genuinely recognized and valued in their uniqueness.

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