

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a horizon for educational research

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Abstract

This article presents a philosophical essay on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a method and its implications for educational research. Based on phenomenology, we analyze the methodological aspects of research on the body, including the intentionality of consciousness, phenomenological reduction, and intersubjectivity, permeated by a sensitive logic, as an alternative for the construction of knowledge. We present an example of research that incorporates the phenomenological approach in early childhood education, considering the study developed by Marina Marcondes Machado. An understanding of the material analyzed provides a theoretical and methodological contribution to the relationships between the perception of the body, the intentionality of consciousness, and intersubjectivity as expressive figures in educational research. The child's experience is a polysemic source for understanding phenomenology, given the relationship with the body, play, and creation, which are configured at the level of sensitive logic that runs through the method.

Keywords: Phenomenology. Intentionality. Body. Intersubjectivity.

A fenomenologia de Merleau-Ponty como horizonte da pesquisa em educação

Resumo

Este artigo é um ensaio filosófico sobre a fenomenologia de Maurice Merleau-Ponty como método e suas implicações para a pesquisa no campo da educação. Fundamentados na fenomenologia, analisamos aspectos metodológicos da

pesquisa sobre o corpo, incluindo a intencionalidade da consciência, a redução fenomenológica e a intersubjetividade permeadas por uma lógica sensível como uma alternativa para a construção do conhecimento. Apresentamos um exemplo de pesquisa que incorpora a abordagem fenomenológica na educação infantil, considerando o estudo desenvolvido por Marina Marcondes Machado. Uma compreensão do material analisado oferece um aporte teórico metodológico em torno das relações entre a percepção do corpo, a intencionalidade da consciência e a intersubjetividade como figuras expressivas para a pesquisa em educação. A experiência da criança é uma fonte polissêmica para a compreensão da fenomenologia tendo em vista 'a relação com o corpo, o brincar e a criação configurados no plano da lógica sensível que atravessa o método.

Palavras-chave: Fenomenologia. Intencionalidade. Corpo. Intersubjetividade.

La fenomenología de Merleau-Ponty como horizonte de la investigación educativa

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Resumen

La fenomenología de Merleau-Ponty como horizonte para la investigación educativa. Resumen. Este artículo presenta un ensayo filosófico sobre la fenomenología de Maurice Merleau-Ponty como método y sus implicaciones para la investigación educativa. Basándonos en la fenomenología, analizamos los aspectos metodológicos de la investigación sobre el cuerpo, incluyendo la intencionalidad de la conciencia, la reducción fenomenológica y la intersubjetividad, impregnados de una lógica sensible como alternativa para la construcción del conocimiento. Presentamos un ejemplo de investigación que incorpora el enfoque fenomenológico en la educación infantil, considerando el estudio desarrollado por Marina Marcondes Machado. La comprensión del material analizado ofrece una contribución teórico-metodológica en torno a las relaciones entre la percepción del cuerpo, la intencionalidad de la conciencia y la intersubjetividad como figuras expresivas para la investigación educativa. La experiencia del niño es una fuente polisémica para la comprensión de la

fenomenología, en vista de la relación con el cuerpo, el juego y la creación configurados en el plano de la lógica sensible que atraviesa el método.

Palabras clave: Fenomenología. Intencionalidad. Cuerpo. Intersubjetividad.

Introduction

This is a philosophical study of phenomenology as a research method in the field of education. Phenomenology, as a philosophical attitude that seeks to understand the essence of phenomena based on lived experience, has Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) as one of its most significant exponents. Throughout his work, the philosopher developed a perception of the body that challenges traditional conceptions, proposing a view of the body not as an object among other objects, but as a place of the subject's bodily and existential experience. This article approaches the phenomenological method from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, examining its epistemological traits and variations, as well as its ontological horizons. Through this investigation, we hope to contribute to an understanding of the body and its relationship with the world, highlighting paths for research and methodological practice in various areas of knowledge, particularly education.

Merleau-Ponty (1994) argues that our bodily experience of the world is primary, that is, before any concept or idea we might have about the world, there is our direct and immediate experience of it through our body. This bodily experience is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "perception." Perception is not a passive process of receiving information from the world, but an active process of exploring and making sense of the world and our experiences. It is through perception that the body opens up to the world and engages with it. In other words, the subject is not a distant observer of the world, but an active participant. Reality is not something that exists independently of perception, but is constituted through the subject's interaction with the world. Merleau-Ponty (1994) states that perception is an intentional and dynamic activity, where the body is not merely a receiver of stimuli, but a subject that sensitively relates to the world and to others. This perceptual process is fundamental because it is through it that we build

our understanding of the world and of ourselves. He challenges the traditional dichotomy between subject and object, proposing that perception involves an intersubjectivity in which the distinction between the "I" and the "other" is fluid and interdependent.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology places subjective experience at the center of human understanding, providing a rich and complex alternative to traditional rationalism. Instead of seeking an objective and universal truth, phenomenology is interested in the diversity and depth of human experiences, recognizing that reality is always mediated by subjective perception. In this way, Merleau-Ponty offers an approach that values corporeality and intersubjectivity as crucial elements in the construction of knowledge and reality.

By emphasizing the primacy of perception, Merleau-Ponty also paves for a more complex and integrated understanding of the human being, uniting the biological, the cultural, language and history. He suggests that our way of being in the world is fundamentally linked to our bodily existence, and that our interaction with the world is always situated and contextual. This has significant implications for fields such as psychology, philosophy, and even neuroscience, where understanding the human experience cannot be fully achieved without considering our corporeality and the way we perceive and interact with the world around us.

Based on the phenomenological framework, we assess methodological aspects for researching the body, including the intentionality of consciousness, phenomenological reduction, and intersubjectivity. These elements constitute the focal point of the phenomenological method, since it involves a critique of the assumptions of both classical philosophy and scientific positivism, broadening rationality through a logic that invests in the body through sensitivity and intercorporeality.

In the state-of-the-art review carried out in the journal *Educação em Questão*, we found five articles dealing with the subject. They are: *O sertão educa* (Ferreira; Nóbrega; Barbosa Júnior, 2014); *Quilombola women and their presence in higher education* (Nascimento; Rezende, 2024); *Environmental perception: a study in a municipal public school in Chapecó - Santa Catarina*

(Ruppenthal; Dickmann; Berticelli, 2018); Philosophy of mathematics: A path for us to (re)think our pedagogical practice (Brito, 2004); The meaning of teaching dance at school (Vieira, 2007); Young black men in conflict with the law: school and trajectories (Pinho, 2011). These references show the presence of phenomenology in the field of educational research, encompassing objects of perception as a source for a variety of knowledge about nature, mathematics, art and pedagogical practice, among others.

The phenomenological method: reduction, intentionality, subjectivity

The phenomenological reduction proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty is an essential tool for understanding the relationship between consciousness and the perceived world. However, it is essential to understand that this approach is not limited to simple introspection or a withdrawal from the world in search of pure consciousness. The very essence of reduction is a process of loosening the ties that connect us to reality, allowing transcendences —those things beyond the immediate —to manifest themselves. It is a crucial movement that allows us to "see transcendences spring up", thus revealing a much more complex and interconnected universe than the everyday view offers us. It's not about denying common sense, but phenomenology invites us to question our assumptions and allow us to see the world authentically. It is not a question of renouncing the certainties of common sense and the natural attitude, but of recognizing that, as presuppositions of all thought, they are evident and often go unnoticed. To make them visible, we need to set them aside for a moment (Merleau-Ponty, 2006).

As a way of finding the unreflected in phenomena, phenomenological reduction is the process by which what is informed by the senses is transformed into an experience of consciousness. It involves being aware of something, regardless of whether it corresponds to an object in the external world. This is because perceptual awareness can open up new sources of knowledge, imagination and creation. Things, images, fantasies, acts, relationships, thoughts, events, memories and feelings make up our experiences of consciousness. Nóbrega (2016) emphasizes that phenomenological reduction is emblematic

because, by bringing essences to light, it also rescues what is unreflected. For Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the unreflected refers to the immemorial background of consciousness that enables reflection, thus being an ontological condition of thought. Thus, reduction is not just a technique of analysis, but a way of accessing a depth of experience that connects us more authentically to the world around us. In phenomenological suspension, also known as *epoché*, we temporarily suspend our beliefs and assumptions about the outside world. The aim is to concentrate on conscious experience itself, without the interference of preconceptions or previous theories. "By placing the phenomenon in suspension, the phenomenological trajectory seeks to establish direct contact with the phenomenon being experienced" (Martins; Boemer, Ferraz, 1990, p. 141).

6 As Marques (2016) points out, phenomenological reduction is the only form of reflection that does not absorb the unreflected, but shows it. This characteristic is crucial, as it reveals the possibility of a consciousness that does not seek to dominate or control experience, but rather to present it in its richness and complexity. Reduction does not aim to remove the individual from the world, but rather to reconfigure their relationship with the world. Marques (2016) explains that reduction must make the world appear, both in the world of perception and in the natural and social worlds. In this sense, phenomenology is not a philosophy that is housed in an isolated space, but rather a movement that brings lived experiences to light, putting the certainties of the natural attitude in abeyance.

Husserl (2012) reminds us that the interest of phenomenology is not in the external world itself, but in the way in which knowledge of that world manifests itself for each person. Reality lies in subjective experience, and phenomenological reduction enables us to access it more directly and authentically (Martins, Boemer, Ferraz, 1990). The movement of consciousness in understanding phenomena is related to intentionality. According to Machado (2001), the concept of intentionality has its roots in medieval philosophy, but was revitalized and became a fundamental part of modern philosophy through the work of the Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano in the 19th century. According to Machado (2001), Brentano used the term to describe the peculiarity of mental phenomena: "All consciousness is consciousness of something". From this

perspective, intentionality is what distinguishes mental phenomena from physical phenomena.

Still according to Machado (2001), Edmund Husserl, one of Brentano's main followers, deepened and expanded the concept of intentionality. He argued that all acts of consciousness (perception, imagination, judgment, etc.) are intentional and that this intentional structure is fundamental to understanding human experience. Husserl developed phenomenology as a method for studying intentionality and the structure of consciousness. In this vein, in *Phenomenology of Perception* —the author's main work—Merleau-Ponty offers an in-depth perspective on intentionality, not limiting it to the relationship between consciousness and the object, but encompassing the connection between the body itself and the perceived world.

Contrary to the strictly cognitive view of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty (2006) emphasizes its connection with motricity and the body itself. The body itself plays a fundamental role in intentionality. Perception is not just a mental representation, but an embodied and situated experience. The body acts intentionally, and this action is intrinsically linked to our understanding of the world. Through the body, we relate to the world, and this relationship is fundamental to our understanding and perception (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1996). Therefore, intentionality in Merleau-Ponty transcends the subject-object duality. It emerges from lived experience and corporeality, influencing areas such as contemporary cognitive science.

Following this same line of reasoning, Dantas (2001, p. 167) points out that "[...] the body itself is equally at stake in all the higher functions, namely the intentional ones". This statement reaffirms the idea that our intentionalities—that is, the direction of our consciousness towards objects, people, or states—are not purely mental functions, but are deeply rooted in our corporeality. The body is not just a vehicle or tool of the mind; it is constitutive of conscious experience itself. It is still possible to go further, because when Merleau-Ponty argues that our body always mediates our perception of the world and of others, intersubjectivity is revealed. Dantas states:

[...] given the need for a perceptual starting point to necessarily be each person's body, which is their own in an exclusive organic way, the problem is immediately the possibility of solipsism, how the body is constituted as the own of the subject who exclusively feels it (Dantas, 2001, p. 168).

This highlights a significant philosophical challenge: to overcome solipsism, the idea that only one's own mind is reliable. Merleau-Ponty offers us possibilities for overcoming this barrier by arguing that our experience is embodied and intersubjective. Other people's consciousnesses are not merely representations of my subjectivity; they have their own intentionalities and exclusivities, which allows for a mutual recognition of subjectivities.

Phenomenology invites us to transcend superficial appearances and to consider the Other as an autonomous entity, not limited by the contingencies of the phenomenal world. According to Merleau-Ponty (1994, p. 8), "There is no difficulty in thinking about the Other because the I and therefore the Other are not bound up in the fabrics of phenomena and are worth more than they exist". Recognizing the Other as an independent being, with its own body and subjectivity, is essential to overcoming the egocentric view: "It must be my exterior, and the body of the other must be itself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 8).

Descartes' famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" emphasizes the solipsistic "I". However, the phenomenological reduction invites us to go beyond this solipsism, recognizing that our existence is intertwined with that of others. Merleau-Ponty (1994, p. 9) states that "The cogito devalued the perception of another, it taught me that the I is only accessible to itself, since it defined me by the thought I have of myself and which I am evidently the only one to have, at least in this ultimate sense."

"The fact that I can be conscious of another that I am not presupposes that my modes of consciousness are not exhausted in my self-consciousness, in a revelation of intentionality" (Dantas, 2001, p.169). This reveals that our consciousness is, by nature, open to the other. Intentionality, therefore, is not an isolated force, directed exclusively inwards or towards inanimate objects; it is also a movement that puts us in relation with other subjectivities.

Merleau-Ponty (1994) substantiates this idea by announcing that intersubjectivity is inseparable from subjectivity. It manifests itself when we return to our past experiences in the present and when we recognize the other person's experience in our own. In other words, awareness of our existence should not be limited to our own perception, but also to our awareness of the other. In this way, the phenomenological attitude of involvement and engagement in everyday situations becomes fundamental to understanding intersubjectivity. By considering the other as an integral part of our world, we align ourselves with the efforts of modern thought, which seeks to connect rationality and social interaction. These intersubjective experiences are lived in the existential event. They manifest themselves in shared history, in the collective imagination, in the affections that connect us and in the expression of the body. In this way, intersubjectivity transcends the isolated individual and becomes an essential part of collective existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). Our individual experiences are intertwined with those of others. In this context, the phenomenological world is not a mere "pure non-being", but the meaning that emerges at the intersection of personal and collective experiences (Capalbo, 2007).

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The elements that underpin the phenomenological method are surrounded by a sensitive logic tied to the body and lived experiences. The following topic presents this perspective.

Sensible logic and corporeality

Sensible logic, understood as the apprehension of the world through bodily processes and perceptual experiences, offers a robust critique of the predominance of pure rationality, which tends to disregard the complexity and richness of sensory experience. This debate becomes even more pertinent when we analyze the critique of rationality and the sensible, discussed in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Nóbrega (2010) emphasizes that the sensible is a constitutive reality of being and knowledge, manifesting itself directly in bodily processes. This perspective suggests that our understanding of the world is not merely an abstract construction, but is rooted in our bodily and sensory experiences.

Sensory reality, therefore, profoundly expresses human existence, encompassing uncertainty, unpredictability, and openness to diverse interpretations. This understanding contrasts with rationality, which often seeks an objective and stable representation of reality, often neglecting the complexity and multiplicity of sensitive experience.

Instead of considering perception merely as a sensory function, Merleau-Ponty argues that sensitive experience should play an autonomous and fundamental role in the constitution of knowledge. According to the author, knowledge should not be seen solely as a rational construction, but as something that emerges from our direct interaction with the world through the senses and the body. The philosopher illustrates this idea by stating that Cézanne didn't believe he had to choose between sensation and thought, or between chaos and order. According to Merleau-Ponty:

Cézanne does not want to separate the fixed things that appear to our gaze from their fleeting way of appearing; he wants to paint matter in the process of forming, order being born through a spontaneous organization. He does not establish a cut between the 'senses' and 'intelligence', but between the spontaneous order of things perceived and the human order of ideas and science' (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p.131).

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Merleau-Ponty invites us to consider that perception is not merely a passive process, but an active and creative way of constituting knowledge, where sensation and intelligence are integrated in the formation of an understanding of the world.

The idea that a theory of the body implies a theory of the sensible is crucial. The body is no longer considered a mere object, but a subject that carries the intentions that link it to its environment, revealing both the subject that perceives and the world perceived (Moutinho, 2004). The body, therefore, carries habitual knowledge and an "implicit or sedimented science" that contributes to perception, challenging the intellectualist view that emphasizes a constant activity of connection. Merleau-Ponty proposes that perception benefits from a "work already done" that intellectualism ignores, emphasizing that sensible knowledge

results from a continuous and pre-existing integration between the body and the environment, rather than a simple act of rational connection.

Furthermore, Moutinho (2004) argues that the sensible should not be seen as an objective spectacle or as a mere correlate of a consciousness, but as an intersensory unity. Just as binocular vision results from the collaboration of two eyes to apprehend a single object, the senses integrate to form a unified perception.

Sensory experience offers perspectives for constructing an aesthetic logos, proposing a new form of rationality based on corporeality and perception (Nóbrega, 2010). This vision suggests that rationality can and should be understood based on bodily and sensory experiences, redefining epistemology by integrating corporeality as a fundamental element in the formation of knowledge. The aesthetic approach to rationality, which considers sensitive experience as a starting point for understanding, offers an alternative to pure rationality. In this sense, the construction of rationality is established not only from abstract senses, but also through the relationship and communication that the individual maintains with the world around them, as Lima Neto and Lima (2018) point out, emphasizing that this initial relationship is essential for the formation of genuine rationality. Thus, the intersection between sensitive experience and reason becomes a fertile field for expanding knowledge, allowing the emotional and bodily dimensions to be recognized as crucial for understanding the world.

By considering sensitive logic, we are invited to re-evaluate the primacy of rationality in the construction of knowledge. The sensitive, as a constitutive reality of being and knowledge, reveals the depth and complexity of our experience, challenging the rationalist vision that tends to disregard these aspects. Instead of seeing knowledge as a purely rational construction, it is necessary to recognize and value the essential role of perception and sensory experience in shaping the world, existence and subjectivity. In this context, it is essential to note that the methods for exploring the dimensions extend beyond conventional philosophical analysis, incorporating a range of practices and approaches that include texts, memoirs, dialogues with other authors, metaphors, images, and artistic expressions. These resources broaden the understanding of the

phenomena being researched and promote a new regime of intelligibility that integrates corporeality and sensitivity in the construction of a more comprehensive scientific rationality (Lima Neto; Lima, 2018).

The child as seen by the adult

How do we see the child? For phenomenology, the birth of a human being is a philosophical problem, as it marks the beginning of consciousness, the transition of a living being from the condition of an organism to that of a subject. Based on Henry Wallon, Merleau-Ponty (2006) observes that the difference between the adult and the child is not the difference between a logical thought and another, but the child's pre-logical thought. It's the difference between the perceived world, which includes a few ultra-things. The child is not enclosed in a magic circle, and even adults are faced with aspects of life that are difficult to represent, such as death. According to Imbert (2024), Merleau-Ponty privileges the child's experience and reproaches Piaget for attributing to the child's conception only a provisional scope. Phenomenology emphasizes the imperative character of the reality of the world, sympathizing with the child's naive trust and its relationship with sensitivity.

Phenomenology sees the child from the child's own perspective, amid their experiences, games and fantasies, as well as in their relationships with their parents, other children and the school. It highlights the importance of affection in the way of relating to others, which shapes an affective grammar. Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 84) argues that "[...] in our relationships with the child, the child is what we transform [...] and that [...] this relationship, this circular relationship, even if it implies a danger of illusion, cannot be avoided". This understanding suggests that their beliefs and expectations shape the way adults interact with children. The adult not only observes the child, but also actively participates in shaping their identity and behavior. Therefore, the child is not only what they are, but also what the adult believes they should be. Thus, the child is not what we believe them to be, or a reflection of what we want them to be. The child has a subjectivity that singularizes them as a being of desire and sensitivity.

The perception of one's own body and body image organizes subjectivity and the way one relates to others, including sociability and affectivity. The body itself enables the differentiation between my body and the outside world, as well as the perception of spatiality and temporality. Just as the body image or mirror image allows the child to recognize itself as a whole being; "Thanks to the mirror image the child takes on a new form of existence, it realizes that it can be looked at and there is a passage from the experienced body to the visible and looked at body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2006, p. 526).

With the experience of the body, the child incorporates the reflection into the image of themselves and other objects in the external world. Initially, there is a duplicity of image: the image and the body. This fragmentation is gradually overcome through the body's motor skills, spatiality, and affective grammar, as mentioned earlier, to complete the body schema and express subjectivity in an integrated body image. In this way, children begin to see themselves through the eyes of others and gradually differentiate and integrate their own gaze in a sensitive way.

The child's perception and expression are key to understanding their lived experience and the construction of meanings, as occurs in drawing. By not being bound by the notion of classical perspective, children's drawings, for example, approach and illuminate the advances of modern painting. In this context,

For Merleau-Ponty, the ignorance of perspective here once again expresses the child's "objectivity without measure", his effort to represent *things themselves*, understood in their affective resonances, rather than copying their visual appearance. The child's drawing thus illustrates freedom from the postulates of our culture and invites us to let go of the obviousness that a long pictorial tradition has given to perspective since the Renaissance. Like living with the great painters, children's drawings make us aware of other dimensions of pictorial representation, for example, the reproduction of an affective equivalent of things (Imbert, 2024, p. 26).

A research alternative

In this topic, we present an alternative form of research based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, where it is possible to identify the methodological aspects addressed in this article. This is the book entitled *Merleau-Ponty and Education*, written by Marina Marcondes Machado. The fruit of her doctoral thesis, the book approaches phenomenology from a perspective focused on children and childhood, always underpinned by Merleau-Ponty's thinking.

We highlight three parts of the book, starting with the introduction, in which the author presents the proposal for a book that explores Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thinking on childhood, based explicitly on the courses he taught at the Sorbonne in the 1940s and 1950s. Merleau-Ponty brought an innovative phenomenological approach to child psychology and pedagogy, which will be the main focus of the book. The author of the book in question revisits Merleau-Ponty's work, seeking to approach the child not from ready-made theories, but from the child's own experience. The central idea is to abandon academicism and adopt a more intimate and accessible approach, which reflects Merleau-Ponty's "speaking speech" and his observations on the child's direct experience. The author reiterates that "[...] seeking a language close to the philosopher's thought and close to the child's heart and giving meaning to a saying about childhood and the child in coexistence with the adult does not seem easy to achieve" (Machado, 2010, p. 6). The book proposes the introduction of a "crouching attitude", a metaphor for the need to approach the child's spatial and sensitive perspective, listening to and genuinely welcoming their points of view. This contrasts with the technical and theoretical approach that dominates many psychological and pedagogical practices.

Child Psychology, as Merleau-Ponty points out in his Courses at the Sorbonne, distances the adult from the child itself by creating theories and proposing procedures on how to educate the child at each "stage of life" through what was conceptualized as "human development. "These procedures were framed by specialized disciplines such as Pedagogy, Pediatrics, Psychology, Child

Psychiatry, as well as by the cultural production market for childhood (Machado, 2010).

The author of the book also reflects on her own academic and personal journey, mentioning how her interest in a phenomenological approach to early childhood education began and evolved. She recognizes that phenomenology does not offer "phenomenological pedagogy" in the pragmatic sense, but rather a way of thinking about and observing childhood that can enrich the understanding of children's experience. The book aims to reorganize and comment on Merleau-Ponty's notions about childhood, emphasizing the importance of phenomenological thinking in the philosophy of education. The author aims to present readers with a detailed and enriching perspective on childhood, in the light of Merleau-Ponty's distinctive contributions.

The author highlights Merleau-Ponty's critique of child psychology, which explores the concept of "pseudo-objective thinking" as opposed to the traditional notion of "representation of the world". Merleau-Ponty argues that young children do not have a conscious, objective representation of the world; instead, they experience the world in a direct and immersive way. This experience is characterized by a lived unity, which is prior to rationality and cannot be reduced to a formal or linguistic representation. Merleau-Ponty argues that children's experience is an order that does not fit perfectly into either rationality or chaos (Machado, 2010).

Machado (2010) presents Merleau-Ponty's thinking on the child in which reality and fantasy are intertwined as a figuration of childhood experience. Merleau-Ponty proposes four "methodological precautions" for studying childhood, which reflect an attempt to avoid reductionism and prejudice in psychological research. These are: the integration of adult and child; infantile polymorphism; the double phenomenon of identification; and prematurity (Machado, 2010). Merleau-Ponty highlights the need for a "new language" to describe children's relationships and dynamics, emphasizing the importance of a detailed and rigorous description of the phenomena (Machado, 2010). The rejection of the concept of "infantile mentality" emphasizes that childhood must be understood in its own terms and not reduced to a preconceived mentality.

Secondly, the valorization of polymorphism highlights the diversity and complexity in children's experiences. Thirdly, the introduction of cultural heritage recognizes the influence of culture on the child's formation through intelligence and imitation. Finally, the principle of prematuration, which observes that the child's life is shaped from an early age by interactions with people and institutions (Machado, 2010).

The author explores the application of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to early childhood education, proposing a "phenomenological" approach that reflects his thinking. The central proposal is to replace traditional adult-centric views of childhood with a methodology that focuses on the child's lived experience within their own context. According to Machado (2010), the methodology suggested by Merleau-Ponty emphasizes understanding childhood through direct experience, observing and reflecting on everyday interactions, rather than applying pre-established concepts, such as "child mentality." For him, the educational approach must reject generalizations and rigid norms, focusing on understanding the child in the context of their unique and individual experiences. This perspective criticizes the idea of a child's "magical world", arguing that children's reality should be approached with the same seriousness and complexity as adult reality.

An education inspired by Merleau-Ponty focuses on observing and respecting the uniqueness of children's experience. This implies choosing materials and methods that do not perpetuate stereotypes or generalizations about what "every child likes" or "should like", but that are aligned with the concrete experience of children. The critical analysis of cultural objects and adult discourses is fundamental to ensuring that educational practice is truly child-centered (Machado, 2010). From a phenomenological perspective, teachers need to develop the ability to observe and interpret the child's experience without prejudice. This includes being attentive to the way children experience their bodies, their times and spaces, and how they express their own experiences and feelings. By adopting a phenomenological approach, early childhood education can become more aligned with children's lived reality, promoting a more reflective, critical and respectful practice. The Merleau-Pontian perspective challenges

the traditional view and offers a methodology that values the individuality and cultural context of childhood, promoting a richer pedagogy informed by the child's direct experience (Machado, 2010).

The concept of polymorphism, according to Marina Marcondes Machado, reveals the child's capacity for a multiplicity of simultaneous actions and transformations, contrasting with the relative rigidity of the adult. For Merleau-Ponty, children are fluid and changeable in their actions and thoughts, while adults tend to be more fixed and intellectualized. This phenomenological understanding suggests that, rather than judging the child for frequent changes in their actions or ideas, the educator should recognize and value this plasticity as an essential part of the child's way of being. For the author, a pedagogy that embraces the child's polymorphic needs must promote flexibility in both educational practice and the adult's attitude. This implies expanding their capacity for perception and creativity, adopting an attitude of "childishness" - that is, a willingness to experiment and engage in the multiplicity of children's expressions. In activities such as theater or dance, the adult's flexibility should manifest itself in the acceptance and celebration of constant change, without judgments about the "futility" or "immaturity" of the child's creations. Instead, the focus should be on the quality of mutation and the diversity of expressive forms (Machado, 2010). Polymorphism is also reflected in the way children deal with fantasy and reality. Instead of labeling children's imagination as "lies" or "disconnectedness", educators should understand these expressions as a natural and healthy part of children's creativity. The child's ability to imagine and create should be seen as a valuable resource from which new activities and pedagogical approaches can be developed. In addition, pedagogical practice can be more than a simple imitation of the adult world. Marina Marcondes Machado criticizes the didactic approach that imposes rigid, predefined imitation activities, suggesting that true imitation occurs spontaneously and is integrated into the child's daily life. Imitation should not be an artificial task, but a natural way of learning and connecting with the world. Therefore, the proposal is for adults to develop a sensitivity to children's polymorphism, expanding their own plasticity and capacity for creation. This involves both creating varied and interesting contexts and

accepting the dynamics and fluidity characteristic of childhood. By adopting this stance, educators can better respond to children's needs and ways of being, thereby promoting a learning environment that recognizes and values the complexity and diversity of children's experiences, as noted by Machado (2010).

The child, far from being a "blank slate", anticipates and experiences aspects of adult experience, reflecting a form of development that does not follow a simple chronological linearity. Instead, child life is a continuous process of transformation, where traces of maturity coexist with elements of polymorphism and pre-logical thinking. Merleau-Ponty's perspective highlights that the way a child perceives the world in early childhood, marked by pre-reflective experience, persists in a non-formalized way into adulthood. Artists, for example, often connect with this way of apprehending the world, characterized by primary impressions and sensations before structured thought (Machado, 2010).

The author gives the example of a four-year-old boy who, after being burned, expresses a mature perception of the fatality of the accident, illustrating how children, even in everyday situations, manifest a wisdom that seems to anticipate adult understandings. Her reaction, expressing her wish that the event hadn't happened, shows a level of self-consolation and reflection on the event that transcends the typical response expected from such a young child. Machado (2010) suggests that understanding these phenomena can lead to a re-evaluation of pedagogical practices, especially in areas such as play and theater. Pedagogy can benefit from adopting an approach that values the polymorphism and plasticity of children's thinking, recognizing that the child's experience is full of nuances and constant change.

In the context of play, plasticity and polymorphism can be encouraged by a teacher willing to embrace a degree of controlled "chaos". Instead of imposing rigid structures on play activities, the educator should create environments rich in diverse materials that allow children to express their own choices and desires. The initial "disorganization" of the activity, from the adult's perspective, is an opportunity for the child to explore and exercise their creativity more freely (Machado 2010).

This approach requires the adult to reorganize themselves mentally in order to understand and value the apparent chaos in children's play. Reorganizing the data, as described by Merleau-Ponty, involves observing and interpreting play not as a series of disordered actions, but as a manifestation of thought and experience in process. Thus, for Machado (2010), by integrating Merleau-Ponty's vision and the practice of detailed observation, educators can create richer learning environments tailored to children's needs and forms of expression, promoting a pedagogy that values the polymorphism and plasticity of children's experiences.

Machado (2010) understands that the teacher needs to be prepared to abandon traditional presentation practices, which often focus on end results and a rigid performance format. Instead, theatrical practice should be a continuous and exploratory process, reflecting the children's creative process more authentically. The Merleau-Pontian implication that stands out is that education can enrich the child's everyday experience, not from an external point of view, but from the child's own experience and expression. Thus, the teacher's role is not only to recognize, but also to foster and expand these creative expressions, respecting and valuing each child's unique way of interacting with the world (Machado, 2010). This approach not only challenges traditional pedagogical practices, but also proposes a richer and more integrated way of exploring children's creative potential.

Machado (2010) emphasizes that the greatest contribution of the phenomenological approach, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, lies in valuing the detailed and rich descriptions made by the adult. Instead of judging the child's development based on pre-established comparisons or standards, the assessment should focus on describing the child's experiences and the contexts in which they occur. This method avoids the use of evaluative concepts such as "better" or "worse" and avoids the imposition of generic development goals. Instead, assessment should seek to understand how the child presents themselves in their entirety, considering their interactions with their body, language, time, space and the world around them. The phenomenological approach focuses on observing and describing how the child lives and expresses their world, reflecting on their way

of being and relating. This involves a detailed and contextualized description of behaviors, emotions, and reactions, taking into account the child's cultural and social context. Machado's proposal is also for these maps to be used to communicate with the community of parents and educators, offering a new perspective on child development that goes beyond traditional report cards and quantitative assessments. Rather than focusing on results and comparisons, the map reveals a continuous and interactive process of growth and learning.

Final considerations

In this essay we have presented an understanding of the phenomenological method by reading Merleau-Ponty and some commentators from the fields of philosophy and education. Reading the texts has allowed us to understand phenomenological reduction as an attitude of suspending prejudices, beliefs, or determinisms in order to focus on lived experience and its description, reporting, and construction of polymorphous meanings. It is understood that the articles analyzed deal with specific and diverse themes in education, such as the teaching of mathematics, culture, the teaching of dance, ethnic and cultural issues. In these themes, the role of the perception of the body and its intentionality is recurrent and nuances the phenomenological perspective in the field of education. Intentionality involves the movement, direction, and threads that we can attribute to experiences, as we weave descriptions, relationships, and interpretations that are capable of broadening the meanings of phenomena, experiences, relationships, and events. This intentional process of phenomenological reduction is made possible by our engagement with the world, through our relationships with culture, language, history, and others.

In the phenomenological perspective, the methodological process is characterized by intentional experience in the imputation of meanings, opening up possibilities for the creation of knowledge in the field of education, as we can see in the work developed by Marina Marcondes Machado in teaching theater with children, in which the perception of the body and its expression provide original educational and aesthetic meanings. The phenomenological approach

proposed by Marina Marcondes Machado suggests a profound transformation in the way we assess and understand child development. By focusing on rich, contextual descriptions and using visual tools such as maps, this approach seeks to capture the complexity and richness of the child's experience. This practice promotes a more respectful and integrated assessment, in line with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which views the child as a being in a situation, constantly interacting with their world and experiences.

Just as reduction, intentionality and intersubjectivity are the foundations of the phenomenological method, the experience of the body, subjectivity, imagination, drawings, games and fantasies are indices for understanding education from a phenomenological perspective. Through the interpretation of the texts analyzed in this essay, we can point to some horizons of meaning for the field of education, with phenomenology as a research alternative, namely: listening to the lived experiences of the subjects as the focal point of phenomenological description; the involvement of the researcher and their culture in the process of phenomenological reduction; and referential interpretation as a guide for creating horizons of meaning. In the case of the analyzed texts, references to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy are recurrent, notably in the concepts of perception, the body, and the sensible as ontological and epistemological realities.

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