

School through the Eyes of Children... Are we just Bricks in The Wall?

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Abstract

Over the years it has been debated what should be the role of school, which is the best teaching practices, and the most appropriate methods in primary education. However, rarely we are available to hear who is at the center of any education system... The student, the child within... We may wonder what children really think. What are their needs and aspirations? Listening to children, we can better understand their ideas, feelings, desires and dreams, about teaching and the school they attend, and how this is reflected in their behavior and development. Their representations of school allow us to rethink education and school itself. So, in this study, we were guided by the eyes of children aged between 8 and 11 years, of both sexes, attending elementary school, in Lisbon. What do they think and how they feel about school? What are their wishes and how they imagine school should be? These were the main objectives. The data was gathered using free associations of words, from questions individually made, and examined through Factorial Correspondence Analysis. Children link school both to playful and learning dimensions. In fact the most important for all of them is the playful side of school, a place where they can meet peers and establish important relations, also with teachers. They care about each other, they wish to learn and feel free. They yearn for a better school... Remembering Pink Floyd, we hope we are not just contributing for more 'bricks in the wall'.

Keywords: Children, school, teacher, education, playing, learning, representations.

1. Introduction

When approaching the first year of school in the life of a child, the anxiety of some parents rises in an almost exponential way. The transition from pre-school to the elementary school (first cycle in Portugal) is lived, especially by the older children, with many doubts, fears and anguish. This new step in children's life is a parental stress factor because it is viewed as a transition from a playful phase to a work phase, and as the shift to a more 'serious' stage in the lives of children. In fact, the anxiety of parents, when not properly managed, may become a big obstacle to the successful integration of the children, because children easily recognize, and they are clearly influenced, by the anguish of adults. Subsequently, children show clear signs of insecurity, distrust, low self-esteem or fears.

The fear that a child may not easily adapt to school is very common among parents. In fact, children often adapt to new situations, faster and more easily than adults. Anyway, an adult may resort to various strategies to facilitate the adaptation process. Whenever he takes the child to know the new space - the school -, may say that the school context is an important place of growth, giving a positive image of the school and the teacher. And so help the youngest to overcome any feelings of insecurity.

There is no doubt that the first years of education are of crucial importance, since they constitute the foundation for future learning. With the entry in the first cycle - elementary school -, the child takes on a new status, since, in addition to

'child', is then also 'student'.

The child is the center of pedagogical action, so, each teacher has to have a clear notion of what the child is, and what she can do, as a student, as well as what she needs to be, as a learning agent, and someone in a process of continuous education and integration (eg Barbosa, 2006). In our daily practice, we observed that children reveal a growing interest in school but often do not feel motivated by education and therefore do not develop a taste for learning, which does not facilitate a good integration into society, nor their personal development.

Education has to be constantly rethought, in order to keep up with the constant changes, at several levels. As the key point of education is the child, it is essential understand and analyze the social representations of children about the school they attend, as an essential element of reflection.

If we are guided by the direct gaze of children, and their perspectives, we can better understand their ideas, needs and desires, and broaden our horizons about what they really think and feel about the school they attend, and how their ideas, thoughts and feelings are reflected in their usual behaviors.

Social representations are an asset to a deep (and psychosocial) knowledge of individuals in interaction in a given society. Through social representations, we can analyze the feelings, thoughts and ideals that motivate us, approach us and move us, and better understand how everything we think and feel may interfere with our choices, actions, behaviors, and even with our conceptions life (e.g. Oliveira, 2008, 2011). "O estudo das pessoas não se pode dispensar de tomar estas representações como seu principal objecto de análise" (Oliveira, 2008, p. 224).

The social representations of school, through feelings and emotions that children express, interconnected with cognitions and associated behaviors, allow us to better understand the children's world, giving us clues to better communication, and better intervention. And so we can help children solve some of their/our problems. One can not conceive of a better world without a better education.

2. Main Objective

Seize and analyze the social representations of children about school, and what is for them the ideal school.

3. Method

We conducted an extensive qualitative study with a sample of 220 participants, boys and girls between 8 and 11 years old, attending the fourth year of schooling, in public schools, in Lisbon. We collect data through a questionnaire composed of open questions, in order to grasp the ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions and symbols, by free association of words to several stimuli; the questionnaire also included questions of socio-demographic order (e.g. gender, age, year, school). All questionnaires were applied in class, after obtaining the authorization to perform the study, and the students were also duly informed that their participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. The stimuli proposed were:

'School makes me think of ...'

'School makes me feel ...'

'How would you like it to be a school?'

'What do you like in school?'

'What do you not like in school?'

4. Results

After analysis of all words given by children – in terms of thoughts, opinions, emotions and feelings – we summarize the results in terms of the main categories or dimensions found, according to the answers to each question (cf. Tables 1-8). Given the extent of the results of this study – and in the present paper we cannot display all the findings – we emphasize the dimensions that characterize the representations of boys and girls.

4.1 'School makes me think of...'

The school is generally synonymous of a learning place (in words as study, learn and teacher) and, also, of leisure or children's play. Associated with these dimensions (cognitive and playful), we still find a relational or interpersonal dimension – which largely is given by words as teacher, friends, laugh and play (cf. Table 1).

Table 1:

Most frequente words

<i>'School makes me think of...'</i>		<i>'School makes me feel...'</i>	
Words	Frequency	Words	Frequency
play	117	well	175
study	117	joy	120
learn	84	cheerful	103
teacher	65	hapiness	72
friends	59	tired	60
laugh	48	intelligent	24
play	41	fun	24
write	36	sad	24
work	33	friendship	23
football	32	bad-being	18
colleague	28	friends	17
read	27	boredom	15
book	24	safe	12
future	23	laugh	12
test	22		
fun	19		
think	19		
joy	18		
class	18		
school employee	15		
playground	15		
swing	15		
run	15		
homework	13		

Children remind us that in school we need to go to classes, write, read, take tests and various types of work (individually or in group), to learn and prepare for the future. But the moments of fun and joy are also seen as essential – collective games, among colleagues and friends are important, as it is also important improve knowledge and learn, acquiring new skills and capacities. So, all classes scheduled, as well as the free/leisure time, are both fundamental for the integration of children in school, and also for their interaction (with their peers and teachers) and development.

Table 2:

<i>'School makes me think of...', by category</i>	
Category	<i>School makes me think of ...'</i>
Boys	football, playground
Girls	learn, lessons, read
8/9 years	swing, run, work
10/11 years	future, testing, lessons, study

We observed that boys, more than girls, represent school as a playful place (football, playground), while girls highlight, above all, the importance of learning (learn, lessons, read), using a more cognitive perspective. Children with 8/9 years show more than those with 10/11 years, the playful side of school – the older children are characterized, in particular, by focus their attention in studying, in the assessment tests to perform, and in their training, in order to better prepare themselves for the future (cf. Table 2).

4.2 *'School makes me feel ...'*

The school provides well-being. Close to 83% of children feel well at school, and about 60% usually feel joy. The words

cheerful and happiness reinforce this representation. However, almost a third of children feel tired (and may feel sadness, bad-being and boredom), which gives us an idea of a less exciting side of school (in part due to the learning effort, and the work to be done). Intelligent, fun, friends, safe and laugh, are other dimensions (with cognitive, emotional and relational aspects) that contribute to the perception of well-being (cf. Table 1).

Boys tend to feel worse in school than girls, perhaps for the pressure to be intelligent, concentrate and study more, not having time to play as much as they would like. Girls tend to feel more tired, psychologically, but also manifest some joy, verifying their effort compensated with good results. Younger children (with 8/9 years) usually feel better, and less annoyed than older (10/11 years). The greater the cognitive-emotional development of children, more they seem to be aware of the difficulties associated with the school, which creates discontent (cf. Table 3).

Table 3:

'School makes me feel...', by category

Category	<i>'School makes me feel ...'</i>
Boys	sad, intelligent, bad-being
Girls	tired, cheerful, happiness
8/9 years	happiness, cheerful, friends
10/11 years	annoyance, bad-being, sad

4.3 *'How would you like it to be a school?'*

Children yearn for a larger school, a beautiful school, with a pool and more places for entertainment, where they could communicate more easily, play or rest. They think the school could be more fun, tranquil, clean, with playing fields (for football), pleasant and natural spaces (with trees), with playful elements (swings), but also with more technological training (with computers – possibly also thinking in games). They imagine a safe, creative and cheerful space (cf. Table 4).

Table 4:

Most frequent words - *'How would you like it to be a school?'*

Words	Frequency
big	69
pool	55
bigger	43
beautiful	35
fun	33
tranquil	25
football field	25
clean	23
ludic	22
swing	19
computer	18
safe	16
play	16
joy	16
trees	13

For boys an ideal school should be bigger, and have more open spaces with trees and football fields, i.e., play areas and sports where they can enjoy moments of competition and fun. Girls would also prefer a school more playful, and fun, a quiet place, with less work to do (in classes and at home), having more space for leisure activities and interaction. Children with 8 and 9 years emphasize fun and a dimension of social interaction, and imagine a school with more trees, swings, and even a swimming pool, while the children with 10 and 11 believe that the ideal school should be more clean, calm and safe (cf. Table 5).

Table 5:

<i>'How would you like it to be a school?', by category</i>	
Category	<i>'How would you like it to be a school?'</i>
Boys	trees, football field, bigger
Girls	fun, playful, tranquil
8/9 years	joy, trees, swings, pool
10/11 years	clean, tranquil, safe

4.4 'What do you like in school?'

What children more appreciate in school are the teachers and friends, and the good relationships that can be established. And, of course, they like to play. Children also refer to the importance of school employees, for the support you give them. The school also becomes attractive given the activities it can offer: sports, playful places and learning opportunities. Places of recreation are essential in school by offering moments of fun, conviviality and pleasure (cf. Table 6).

Table 6:

Most frequent words

<i>'What do you like in school?'</i>		<i>'What do you not like in school?'</i>	
Words	Frequency	Words	Frequency
teacher	81	bad manners	46
friends	57	violence	42
playground	49	some teachers	39
play	46	fight	27
school employee	40	beat	22
physical education	31	wc	16
bar	30	dirt	15
classroom	29	mathematics	13
play (games)	27	class	13
trees	25	school employee	13
study	24	schedule	12
football	20	indiscipline	11
football field	20	food	11
learn	20	english	10
colleague	19	punishment	10
library	19	homework	10
school cafeteria	16		
field	14		
swing	14		
gym	12		
class	11		
music	10		
sports pavilion	10		

Boys, in comparison with girls, are those who more clearly like to play games in school, football in particular – play and physical aspects are very important in their development. For its part, girls, more evidently than boys, highlight the role of school in their learning, training and affective development, giving them the opportunity to study, learn, and have friends (cf. Table 7).

Table 7:

<i>'What do you like in school?'; by category</i>	
Category	<i>'What do you like in school?'</i>
Boys	football, football field
Girls	study, learn, friends
8/9 years	play, swing, trees
10/11 years	bar, gym, field

Younger children like to be in school, especially, for its playful side, given the chance to interact and play with friends and colleagues. More than play, children with 10 and 11 years particularly appreciate a safe school, where they can socialize with friends, in recreation spaces – like a bar, a gym or in the field (cf. Table 7).

4.5 *'What do you not like in school?'*

In general, children do not like the lack of rules, bad education, indiscipline, violence and insecurity; also reveal that they do not like some of the teachers. The lack of hygiene, food quality, some of the school employees, mathematics, too much work, the type of classes (too theoretical or too little interactive), and lack of leisure times, are other aspects that reference with some frequency – which also translates some fatigue in face of situations experienced in day-to-day with classmates, teachers and assistants, and the (long) hours they spend in school (cf. Table 6).

Table 8:

<i>'What do you not like in school?'; by category</i>	
Category	<i>'What do you not like at school?'</i>
Boys	schedule, indiscipline, food
Girls	indiscipline, wc, dirt
8/9 years	violence, beat, fight, homework
10/11 years	indiscipline, bad education, teacher, schedule

Girls dislike, more clearly than boys, of situations of indiscipline; also refer to the state of the bathrooms, by poor hygiene or privacy conditions, and the difficulty in mathematics. For boys, the class schedule is the worst, in good part because it prevents them from doing other activities they would most like; fighting, violence and poor quality of food at school, are other aspects that do not like (cf. Table 8).

Children with 8 and 9 years say they do not like, especially, of situations of violence at school - they do not like to see hit, or be beaten by others. They also do not like to have so much homework - which leads us to think about the excessive time children spend in school. Children with 10 and 11 years highlight, more than violence, indiscipline - associated not only to the classroom, but also to some teachers and teaching assistants; they would like to have more time to be with colleagues, to play or just to feel in a relaxed atmosphere (cf. Table 8).

5. Conclusions

The school must respect each student as an individual – as a unique being with a life story, culture, references and values – providing you not only opportunities to learn and integrate new knowledge, but also helping him to understand himself, stimulating him, on one hand, to discover himself in his intimate and, secondly, in his integration in the social spheres in which we move, and in society itself (e.g. Oliveira, 2011).

The child is the central element in the whole educational process, so it is essential listen to her carefully, listen to her views, see what she like and do not like, and what does she think would be the ideal school. We can reflect on what children tell us, in their representations of school and teachers, and also on the teaching practice, the school and the education system itself, in its essence and in its pedagogical variants.

Through the educational act each individual transforms himself, becomes more attentive and perhaps more preoccupied, develops his way of thinking, to understand the complexity of the reality where he lives (e.g., Barbosa, 2004). The school has a duty to promote the progress of students in a wide range of intellectual objectives, social, moral and affective. The effective education system is what maximizes the school's ability to achieve these results (e.g., Bolivar,

2003; Santos, 1991). Teaching is not merely transfer knowledge and contents, nor contributing to support persons who don't like to think for themselves, preferring to just memorize or repeat what they hear/read or what it is passed to them, feeling accommodated or indifferent.

It is necessary each student take over as the central piece of his training, of the production of its knowledge, engaging himself, from the start, in its construction, whereas the teacher has the role of create the possibilities for this to happen (e.g., Freire, 2002).

In this study, we analyzed the social representations of school, among Portuguese children, from 8 to 11 years. Guided by the childish look, we verified that children have a dichotomous view of the school. On the one hand, they recognize that school is essential in the teaching-learning process, to acquire knowledge and learn; on the other, children easily associate school to a playful dimension, they represent it as a space where they can play, interact with the colleagues and friends, and have fun, which also contributes to their personal development, as well as their integration and socialization.

In any case, it is unanimous among children, that school should have a playful character, providing interactive classes and leisure activities, recreational projects and spaces for relaxing (between classes, or after classes) and socializing – this is a representation we can consider as hegemonic (Moscovici, 1988) or widely shared in this population. They imagine a better school, with more natural spaces, playful fields and interactive activities. Children also yearn for a larger, cleaner, peaceful and safer school.

In the school context, proposing games, using games or other forms of interaction, between teacher and children/students, as a means of learning, is a good path to academic success. The teacher should have an open mind to the playful, be able to convey trust and interact, recognizing its importance as a factor in personal, social and cultural development of each child. Stimulated by the teacher, the child feels most encouraged to go further and participate, and may learn more easily, with greater commitment and satisfaction by collaborating actively in shaping their own personality, and facilitating the processes of socialization, communication and expression. Being the failure school a concern of governments, would be a good strategy, counter this failure, resorting to didactic games, in the context of teaching and learning, and provide better and rewarding leisure activities in schools, without losing track of the goals to achieve (e.g., Santos, 2001).

It is urgent to motivate children for school and for life. An unmotivated child will not reveal a good self-confidence, and will have difficulties to learn. Children realize that school is a mandatory path to go, to achieve knowledge and to prepare them for the future professional world, but they also realize that this path is made at some cost and sometimes, extreme fatigue. In fact, schools often require intense rhythms of work, have hard schedules, and children spend too much time in school, attending classes or extra-classes - in addition, the class times are not always the most consistent, and not all children can follow this process (Avô, 2000). Children complain that the school occupies them for too much time, leaving them little time to play and develop other activities that interest them. The homework is mentioned as something that occupies the little free time they have.

Considering the filled schedule of classes, teachers could make a balanced management of work that send for the children to do after classes - at home, or even in school. If teachers decided to reduce or avoid the homework, that option would not necessarily harm school performance, and it would not be for that reason that they would be worst teachers. On the contrary, such an attitude would reveal sensitivity, knowledge and respect for the needs of their students, and the importance to be given to the time of interaction of children with their relatives (parents, siblings, ...), which is often too scarce. In fact during the scholar year, children don't have much time to stay at home, and most of that time, must be destined to do homework, or to sleep. So, it is natural that children emphasize the importance of playing and interacting, with each others, and with their relatives, at home.

In sum, children care about each other, they wish to learn and feel free. They yearn for a better school... Remembering Pink Floyd, we hope we are not just contributing for more 'bricks in the wall'.

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