SHARING SCHOLASTIC LIFE: WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK ABOUT IT?

Talou, Carmen L.; Borzi, Sonia L.; Sánchez Vázquez, María J.; Iglesias, María C.

Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences. Psychology Career, Science and
Technical Sectretary. La Plata National University, Argentina.
cltalou@isis.unlp.edu.ar

Abstract

In this article we present the results found in a descriptive- exploratory study, in which we investigated a group of scholar's (9 and 10 years old) conceptions of their classmates with psychological disorders at school.

The answers of 90 students who belong to low and average socio- cultural level groups were analyzed. These groups were identified in relation to the parent's occupational category and educational level. The instrument elaborated to such aim was a semi- structured interview which included different aspects related to: which the most frequent problems are, how these problems are expressed at school, which their determinants are and the consequences for the children, as well as the their self referred knowledge of these problems.

Key words: infantile conceptions; infantile scholastic problems; learning disorders; behavior disorders; development disorders; causal attribution.

Introduction

Beginning the third millennium, psychologists are much more participating in an interdisciplinary work with other professionals, searching for answers to the complex vicissitudes of the infantile development problems.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, known as "The Child Century" due to the progress in psychological research on children, it was understood that infantile global development studies were insufficient for the explanation of what the individuals do in relation to the natural, social and psychological world. In that sense, it was supported that "knowing what to do" was determined to a large extent by the specific representations that children construct about the reality, and it was necessary to investigate the world's conceptions that they have elaborated, as well as the capacities and conditions that make them possible.

Bruner (1997) highlights the importance of studying the interrelation between individuals, which is a central aim in the contemporary investigation, affirming that "the daily handling of life, and particularly the social life, requires that everybody act as a psychologist, that everybody have theories on why other people act as they do". Its importance is based on

the fact that "often, these implicit theories reflect the ideals and aspirations of a culture" (p. 181).

The current discussion about the knowledge of social world from different theoretical concepts has developed very much and it is very heterogeneous. Analyze it would exceed the possibilities and aims of this article.

Nevertheless, we cannot avoid mentioning that the acquisition processes, the construction, the learning of values, the knowledge and the ideas of the social world have been analyzed from different points of view. This generated different denominations, such as: mental models, mental schemes, representations, implicit conceptions, theories, ingenuous theories, knowledge domains, among others. The question about the mechanisms of configuration and the specificity of the process versus the generality is formulated in all these conceptions, with great impact especially in the last decade.

Among the theoretic perspectives that approached this problem it must be highlighted the constructivism perspective -"The child's representation of world " written by Piaget in 1926 is the first publication where the importance of the topic is exposed-; the Vigotsky's socio-cultural theory and the work of his continuators; the movement born in the United States known as Social Cognition; the theory of social representations that begins with Moscovici's and his collaborator's work; the "theory of the mind" and its impact on the investigation of the normal and abnormal infantile development; the implicit theories.

Our interest is focused on how the social world representations are modified through the psychological development, showing a child's construction process; and how, as he grows up, gives sense to the world that surrounds him (Delval, 2001). Nowadays, many theoreticians of infantile development reject the traditional consideration of the psychological process and phenomena as strictly individual. Consequently, these models are formulated to explain these phenomena in relation to interpersonal, institutional, social and cultural contexts. These phenomena are necessarily registered, emerged and constituted in these contexts (Coll, 1997). Particularly, the children's knowledge and social behavior could not be wholly explained if we separated them from the interpersonal surroundings in which they act.

The scholastic environment includes diversity, which is a human condition and has may ways of expression; differences such as the language, the culture, the religion, the sex, the socioeconomic level, the geographic condition, as well as the varied ways, space and time to learn, including the "disability". These realities, among some other, express the complex situations and the problems that emerge at school.

The children are early integrated into institutional places, among some other the school, where they remain for a long time. This allows them to create particular opinions on different intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational topics. These infantile ideas are

shared with the people that integrate their social life and they are not reproduced as a copy. In contrast, they are elaborated cognitively; they constitute their original, personal, and also shared conception of the world in general and the student in particular.

School has become a place with a specific community, in which there are related different actors who share aims and play different roles with different meanings. For example, the relationship that children maintain with their classmates who have different disorders could be a source of difficulties if such difficulties are not clearly specified.

The results of some researches about the relationship between classmates inform that the way children relate to their classmates at school becomes a strong determinant of the future social and academic behavior (Gettinger, 2003).

The studies that analyze the relation between causal attributions and achievements or scholastic behavior have generally followed the theoretical model proposed by Weiner (1979, 1986). In it the achievement is explained because of the ability, the effort, the difficulty in the task, the hazard. The author understands the attribution as the inference that a person does with regard to the causes of the own or the other people's behavior. These causes can be ordered according to characteristics like these: locus of causality (internal/ external), temporality (stable/ variable) and controllability (controllable/ uncontrollable).

In the same theoretical perspective, Baez de la Fé, B. and Jiménez, J. (1994) found differences between students with and without learning difficulties, in addition to changes based on the age, with a tendency to internal/ external dichotomy.

There are many studies about the representations of involved adult actors in daily tasks with children who present special education needs, and also about the way these children feel their own difficulties. Nevertheless, to us it has not been sufficiently investigated what children without problems think of those who present difficulties at school. It is very interesting "to listen" to these other protagonists of the integration of children with difficulties into common schooling.

This investigation intends to contribute to inform how scholastic children elaborate "theories" and construct explanations about the disorders that some of their classmates present. It is also possible to presume that the recognition of the mentioned disorders could acquire different characteristics according to the original socio- cultural level.

Method

Individuals: The casuistry was constituted by 90 boys and girls who attend third, fourth and fifth year of the Basic General Education (Primary school) at schools from La Plata, which depend on the Education and Culture General Direction of the Province of Buenos Aires. These children have also recognized their classmates at school with psychological

disorders. 45 children of the group belong to families of low socio- cultural level (LSCL) and 45 belong to families of average socio- cultural level (ASCL).

The criteria considered for choosing the children were:

- Age between 9 and 10 years, of both sexes, placed in an intermediate period of schooling so as to guarantee their experience with children who present different kinds of disorders and their capacity to reflect on them and talk about it.

- Be identified by the teacher as boys and girls whose scholastic activities are developed without difficulties ("normal children");

- Regular attendance at school;

- Be identified in relation to the education and job of both parents: belonging to low or average socio- cultural level families. (1)

Design and procedure:

The instrument used for the exploration of the infantile representations was a semi-structured interview designed for this study. The interview included course questions that guided the dialogue with the interviewed children and that contemplated the following aspects: (2)

- Kind of problems:

Throughout the questions included in this aspect, it is explored children's identification of the specific manifestations of what they have determined as "problems" of their classmates at school (How are they like?, When?, For how long?, Where?, With whom do they have the problems?).

- Explanation or causal attribution of the problems:

The reasons and the relationship between factors with which children try to explain the determinants of their classmate's problems are investigated (What is the cause of the problems?, What does the teacher think?, What do you think?, What does the child think?).

- Consequences for the child himself and for other people:

It is explored the attribution of effects and the derivations that these problems could have for the child himself and for other people in a mediate and immediate future (For whom is it a problem, What will happen to the child if he continues behaving like he does?).

- Definition of infantile problems at school

Children are asked to specify in a more general and abstract level of conceptualization the kind of problems, explanations and consequences that could be provoked at school (What is it having problems at school for you?).

The interviews were made individually, generally at the school the children attend, with a clinical method style, what allows us to approach the infantile knowledge, their arguments

and justifications. The interviews longed for about 40 minutes, and they were recorded in audio and transcribed textually

Results

The results presented in this article correspond to the analysis of the data collected according to the four aspects that were approached in the interview: *kind of problems determined by the children, causal attribution and/or explanations of the problems, consequences of those problems and definition of problems at school*, considering the children's socio- cultural level. It is presented for each aspect fragments of the children's speech that illustrate the identified categories.

According to the answers analyzed in the *Kind of problems* aspect (Table 1), it is significant that 80% of LSCL children identify learning and behavior difficulties, whereas in ASCL children only a 61% talk about this kind of disorders.

Problems referred exclusively to the scholastic learning are mentioned by 7% of LSCL children, whereas in ASCL 24% of the children mention it.

Finally, an 11% of children of both groups allude exclusively to behavior disorders.

Table 1: Kind of problems of the children at school according to socio- cultural level

Kind of problems	ASCL	LSCL
Behavior and learning	61%	80%
Only learning	24%	7%
Only behaviour	11%	11%
Other	4%	2%

Let's read some of the children's answers:

Guillermo, 9 years old. (ASCL): "They behave badly, they finish the schoolwork and they start bothering, they throw things, they spit pieces of paper with the pen, it disgusts me".
Milagros, 9 years old. (ASCL): "A boy who behaves badly, always says ugly things to me, he beats me, beats the boys to them to me... He does not do the homework, he does nothing, he plays; he doesn't know how to do the homework, they tell him to do it and he doesn't. He runs out the classroom. He plays the fight, touches women's hair".
Luisina, 9 years old. (ASCL): "They tell him to do it and he doesn't. Teacher explains to him and he does not understand. He plays and he doesn't want to lose, always he wants to win, he beats if he loses, he pulls the hair to the girls, he bothers, he runs around the classroom, throwing little planes, says ugly things. He makes the teacher shout (...) a

classmate who does not understand the Roman numbers, the teacher explained it to her and she did not understand them".

Sergio, 9 years old. *(LSCL): "He fights with all the boys, does not make the exercises, he goes on drawing. He beats, insults, he goes out and bothers to other kids, bothers, takes out the pencil...; he finishes crying".*

Noeli, 9 years old. *(LSCL)"He behaves very badly, says bad words, badly to the teacher, robs toys to you, he behaves that way with everybody... he doesn't do the schoolwork either, he is bothering, he holds you, he removes the rule to you, the hair, the pencils, he removes a lot of things; he stands up, he speaks, walks, he goes out; the teacher tells him to remain quiet, do the exercises and he does not do them, he doesn't understand them; the teacher explains to him but he does not do them; he fights against the boys, he pulls the girl's hair".*

Claudelina, 10 years old. *(LSCL): "They don't know how to copy a dictation, not even making accounts; they do not know to read and they have misspelling, and to do the homework; they fight with the classmates".*

Analyzing these problematic situations in a more detailed way, it is recognized the following relation: in relation to learning situations and children's achievement based on the tasks they must do, in the ASCL it appears learning disorders relatively to precise contents or to specific subjects.

The aggressive behavior, which includes as physical as verbal aggression and violence of different intensity and persistence, is mentioned more frequently by the LSCL children, in a 41% of the cases (Table 2).

Table 2: Problematic situations in relation to the socio- cultural level

Problematic situations	ASCL	LSCL
Partial learning	5%	1%
Global learning	8%	8%
Permanent infringement of tasks	5%	10%
Regular realization of tasks	14%	6%
Slight restlessness	19%	12%
Serious restlessness	10%	13%
Aggressiveness	28%	41%
Other	11%	9%
Total	100%	100%

In the *Explanation of the problems* aspect, the determinants are attributed to personal characteristics of the child or to the context. The first refer basically to three aspects: a-

motivation, interest, responsibility, effort, in 31% of the cases of ASCL and in 23% of LSCL; b- badness, rebellion, pleasure when bothering in a 44% of the cases in the first group and in a 62% in the second group; and c- congenital problems, lack of intelligence or understanding, in 19% of ASCL and 13% of LSCL (Table 3).

Table 3: Internal determinants according to average and low socio- cultural level

DETERMINATS	ASCL	LSCL
Motivation /Effort	31%	23%
Badness /Rebellion	44%	62%
Congenital /Lack of intelligence	19%	13%
Other	6%	2%

María Sol, 10 years old. (ASCL): "He doesn't have familiar problems; the parents are good, it's his problem, the parents come at the school ceremonies, the brother celebrated the birthday".

Juan Pedro, 9 years old. (ASCL): "Because he speaks too much and he needs to study more".

Paola, 9 years old. (ASCL): "He was not taught enough, he comes from another school (...) That didn't help him enough, perhaps he would need a teacher who is very close to him, next to him, and he never had it".

Noelia, 9 years old. (LSCL)"Perhaps the parents didn't educate him well, perhaps he has problems at home".

Verónica, 10 years old. (LSCL): "I don't know…perhaps if he were with other children...; I do not know why he is like that".

Sandra, 10 years. (LSCL): "She was a bit crazy, she crashed to a bus and a piece of plastic was put into her brain".

Lina, 9 years old. (LSCL): "Because her mother doesn't teach him, and he doesn't study at home".

In relation to external determinants, which are referred to the context, most of the children of both groups consider the family and its conflicts, mentioning its educative function and the kind of interactions.

The answers given to the *Mediate and immediate consequences* aspect do not present important differences in both groups in the immediate scholastic life (learning, sanction and interpersonal relations). But, when they refer to long term consequences, the low level children mention job insertion situations and adaptation social matters.

Federico, 9 years old. (ASCL): "There are boys at school who as soon as you bother them, they hit you; to me those boys are going to hit him, if they do it, they will continue doing so. Later they are going to rob. Later he's going to rob".

Mariana, 9 years old. (ASCL): "He would at least repeat the scholar year; I believe that it wouldn't be good for him, but he would learn more".

Luisina, 9 years old. (ASCL): "He will not approve the exams, he will dot badly, he will be suspended; in the future, well, because he is going to learn, he is going to change; if he is suspended he will think that everything he did was wrong and perhaps he changes".

Daiana, 10 years old. (LSCL): "Teachers send him a lot of comments, the Director is asked to come, also the police because if they fought, they take him... It was said that they were going to consult a judge in order to make a decision, I don't know what, but they did nothing. [How will his future be like?] Surely he is going to rob, surely he will do badly, and he will also know nothing".

Martín, 9 years old. (LSCL): "The teacher tells him that if he continues behaving like he does, she is going to write three observations about him and he will be suspended".

Claudelina, 10 years old. (LSCL): "They will not know how to study and they will stay too much time at school. They are not going to know when somebody asks them to read or do something".

When we interrogated the children about the *Definition of problems* aspect, the answers presented a high degree of dispersion, being mentioned up to nine possibilities in ASCL, whereas in the second group the maximum rank was five.

If we considered the sum of the four first elections, the *conflicting social situations with the classmates* is the most mentioned aspect in both groups.

For the first election, in the LSCL group, it appears more frequently (28%) "to behave badly" (without much precision), and answers related to "embarrassing or shameful" situations felt in a 20%; whereas in ASCL, the first and most frequent election is related to suffer from "abandon situations ", in a 23% (Table 4).

Table 4: What it is to have problems at school according to socio- cultural level

Problems	NSC	1ª ans.	2ª ans.	3ª ans.	4ª ans.
		%	%	%	%
Neglect situation	ASCL	23	22	9	4
	LSCL	9	7	4	4
Embarrassing situation	ASCL	6.5	0	0	0
	LSCL	20	4	0	0
Sanction situation	ASCL	6.5	6.5	6.5	4

	LSCL	13	9	4	2
Opposition to the institution	ASCL	15	9	4	2
	LSCL	28	4	2	0
Opposition to learning	ASCL	15	17	11	11
	LSCL	9	11	15	13
Opposition to classmates	ASCL	15	30	28	6.5
	LSCL	9	23	20	11
Opposition to authority	ASCL	4	2	22	9
	LSCL	0	17	6.5	2

Juan Pedro, 9 years old. *(ASCL): "Do not study, do not pay attention to the teacher and that stuff, to play a lot".*

Paola, 9 years old. *(ASCL): "Do not understand, bring the homework undone everyday because nobody helps me, or nobody assists me".*

Pablo, 9 years old. *(ASCL): "To fight and those things; to insult; to spit, all those stuff; to take out things".*

Nara, 10 a. *(ASCL): "To behave badly; not having respect for the flag, which is a worthy symbol; answer in a bad manner; not making the exercises".*

Maira, 9 years old. *(LSCL): "To sign the discipline book three times, it would be very awful"*

Mónica, 9 years old. *(LSCL): "It would be horrible; because all the others approve the exams and I remain in the same grade, it is very shameful!"*

Verónica, years old. *(LSCL): "Not behaving well, not making the exercises, and not obeying the teacher".*

Zulema, 10 years old. *(LSCL): "Something bad, because if I behave badly, I have to stand up and stay quiet".*

Sandra, 10 years old. *(LSCL): "I do not like it because they tell you off; they write to you; also, my mother doesn't want them to write observations about me; a bad reminder... my mother said that she was going to hit me".*

Daiana, years old. *(LSCL): "It's very awful! Because if perhaps you want to do something, and it cannot be done, you are behaving badly".*

Natalia, years old. *(LSCL): "To be aggressive, not respecting the teacher and the classmates, not doing the schoolwork".*

Conclusion

The results found illustrate differences according to the socio- cultural level. First, children who belong to low socio- cultural level families consider, in relation to psychological

problems, learning disorders in articulation with behavior problems as "problematic situations", with daily and permanent repercussions in scholastic dynamic in general and in the classroom in particular. These problems do not have such importance and characteristics for the average level group of children, who also indicate that learning disorders are related to specific areas.

In relation to the determinants and the way they participate in scholastic situations, in the low socio- cultural level group of children it occurs an external- internal divergence, whereas in the average level group the problems are mainly attributed to the child and his personal characteristics and how they are expressed in different scholastic situations. Both groups mention the family and its problems and how they affect the child at school.

In relation to the mediate and immediate consequences, both groups recognize repercussions on the scholastic learning level and the possibility of receiving scholastic sanctions. The differences rest on the fact that the average level children state consequences which are related to their group's relationship, and those of low level relate them to the future job insertion. Also, it is important to indicate that only a few children of the average level group think that these problems are transitory and do not have future repercussions.

Finally, when asking the children their conception of "what it is to have problems at school", we received varied kinds of answers which are more related to a personal malaise conceptualization than to a general consideration. Children of both levels mention most frequently problems referred to the relationship with their classmates; secondly, in the case of low level children, they mention arguments related to the norms and obligations obedience and, in the case of the average level group of children, they neglect situations.

Notes

1. Criteria for establishing the original socio- cultural level
   - Low socio- cultural level: Education: complete or incomplete primary school of both parents. Occupation: non- skilled or semi-skilled Job.
   - Average socio- cultural Level: Education: complete High school of both parents and complete or incomplete academic studies of one of the parents. Occupation: professionals, retailers and qualified employees.

2. The interview includes another aspect which explores the infantile conceptions on the disable persons.

References

1. Asociación Psiquiátrica Americana (1994). *D.S.M.-IV. Manual diagnóstico y estadístico de la enfermedades mentales.* Barcelona: Masson.

2. Astington, J. W. (1993). *El descubrimiento de la mente*. Madrid: Morata.

3. Baez de la Fe, B. - Jiménez, J. (1994). *Contexto escolar y comportamiento social.* En M. J. Rodrigo, M. J. (Editora). *Contexto y desarrollo social.* Madrid: Síntesis.

4. Bruner, J. (1997*). La educación puerta de la cultura*. Madrid: Visor.

5. Castorina, J. A. - Lenzi, A. (comp.) (2001).*La formación de los conocimientos sociales en el niño.* Barcelona: Gedisa

6. Coll, C. (1997). Prólogo. En P. Lacasa. *Familias y escuelas*. Madrid: Visor.

7. Delval, J. (2001). *Descubrir el pensamiento de los niños. Introducción a la practica del método clínico.* Barcelona: Paidós.

8. Delval, J. - Padilla, M. L. (2000). El desarrollo del conocimiento sobre la sociedad. En F. López, I. Etxebarria, M. J. Fuentes y M.J. Ortiz. *Desarrollo Afectivo y Social*. Madrid: Pirámide.

9. Enesco, I.; Delval, J.; Navarro, A. y otros (1995). *La comprensión de la organización social en niños y adolescentes.* Madrid: AUM-MEC.

10. Gettinger, M (2003). Promoting social competence in an era of school reform: a commentary on Gifford-Smith and Brownell. *Journal of School Psychology,* 41, pp. 299-304

11. Grifford-Smith, M.; Brownell, C. (2003). Chilhood peer relationships: social acceptance, friendships , and peer networks. *Journal of School Psychology,* 41, pp. 235-284.

12. Gómez J. C. - Núñez M. (1998). "La mente social y la mente física: desarrollo y dominios de conocimiento". *Infancia y aprendizaje,* 84, pp. 5-32.

13. Goñi, A. (1989). "La conceptualización de la vida social escolar". *Infancia y aprendizaje,* 47, 1, pp. 101-112.

14. Higgins, E.T. (2000)."Social cognition: Learning about what matters in the social world". *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30, pp. 3-39.

15. Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1992). *Más allá de la modularidad.* Madrid: Alianza.

16. Lacasa, P. (1997). *Familias y escuelas. Caminos de la orientación educativa* Madrid: Visor.

17. Lewis, A. (1995). *Children's Understanding of disability*. London: Routlege.

18. Lewis, A. (2002). The develpomen of children´s ideas about difficulties in learning. *British Journal of Special Education*, 29, 2, pp. 59-65.

19. Montenegro, H.; Bralic, S. y otros (1983). *Salud Mental del escolar. Estandarización del Inventario de Problemas Conductales y Destrezas sociales de T. Achenbach, en niños de 6 a 11 años*. Santiago de Chile: CIDE- UNICEFF.

20. Moscovici, S. (Comp.) (1984). *Psicología Social , II*. Barcelona: Paidós.

21. Navarro, A. - Enesco, I. (1998). "Las ideas infantiles sobre la movilidad socioeconómica: un estudio comparativo entre niños mexicanos y españoles". *Infancia y Aprendizaje*, 81, pp. 27-44.

22. Perron, R.; Auble J-P; Compas, Y. (1998). *L'enfant en dificultés. L'aide psychologique à l'école.* París: Dunod.

23. Turiel, E.; Enesco, E. y Linaza, J. (Compiladores) (1989). *El mundo social en la mente infantil*. Madrid: Alianza.

24. Vila, I.(1997). *Familia, escuela y comunidad.* Barcelona: Horsori.

25. Zerbino, M. (2000). Conceptualización infantil del sistema de castigos en la escuela. En J.A. Castorina y A. Lenzi. (comp.) *La formación de los conocimientos sociales en el niño.* Barcelona: Gedisa.