

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF A GROUP OF INFANTILE EDUCATORS CONCERNING THEIR PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY AT THE DAY CARE CENTER.

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1. Introduction

In Brazil the child-attending institutions, nowadays defined as day-care centres and preschools, attend children from zero to six years of age, offering a first stage of basic education. The day-care centres and preschools were built historically for a dual function. Some institutions, among them kindergarten and preschools, established educational objectives and developed activities of a pedagogic character. Others, such as the day-care centres, assumed a hygienist and assisting function, thus defining a role as guards and deposits of children. Preschools and kindergarten turned to educative objectives due to coming under the responsibility of educational organs, such as the Secretariats of Education. Furthermore, the fact that such institutions positioned themselves toward attending children coming from the middle classes differentiated the form of attendance of small children in these institutions.

For the day-care centres, the role of guardian was perpetuated in view of their being, until very recently, harnessed to the Secretariats of Well Being or the Secretariats of Health, while being public institutions. Another reason for this to occur was due to the fact that the day-care centre had, from the beginning, the objective of sheltering and guarding abandoned children or the so-called children of less-favoured families, with a view to minimizing poverty and infant mortality. The team of professionals who worked at the day-care centres until recently congregated laymen, nurses, and social assistants. Although the day-care centre was considered an institution that should be turned toward the children's education, qualified personnel for educational production was absent from such institutions. The reason for that is that the professional activities developed therein were turned toward care, cleanliness, hygiene and feeding of small children. Thus there appeared to be no need for specialized people in the practices of education.

The day-care centres gathered those who brought in their luggage the knowledge acquired in everyday life, in the handling of their children or younger brothers and sisters, and who were fond of children.

Historically, the presence of female workers was predominant in these institutions, since the activities had predominant characteristics of domestic work: care and accompaniment of small children. However, foreseeing the expansion of the day-care centres, an increase in the female presence is perceptible, in the exercise of teaching. One of the favourite fields of work for these professionals in education is located in the day-care centres and preschools.

Today, and differently from what happened at its origin, the day-care centre presents itself as a social necessity, and the discussions involving its functions point toward care as much as education in seeking the children's development, both in their physical aspects and their psychological characteristics.

In as much as social representations (SR) express things and ways of those who explain and construct them, our objective in this research is to learn the meaning of the professional activity to a group of child educators, seeking to identify the content, organization and structure of that representation.

The theoretical matrix that is fundamental to this research is the Theory of Social Representations (TSR) created by Serge Moscovici in France and developed by groups of collaborators from several European countries as well as from Brazil. Moscovici (1976), who proposes the concept of SR, scientifically investigates the understanding of the individual and his relation to society, considering that the social dimension only exists if the individual exists, and the individual only exists within the social dimension. He sought to understand the dynamics of the relation between the individual and society, how the social dimension interferes in the elaboration of individuals' SR and how these interfere in the elaboration of SR of the group they belong to.

The SR attempt to explain, as from relations with reality, how beliefs, values and concepts are formed in individuals, how subjects construct their own ideas to understand the world, according to the place they occupy in society, which gives them a social reality.

The research concerning representations of the professional activity of child educators was conducted in a public institution, called day-care centre, located in the city of

Cuiabá, which offers care to children between the ages of one year and eight months and seven years, who remain at the institution during the whole day. The sample studied involved twenty-four effective and temporary teachers, who worked directly and daily with the children.

2. Method of analysis

In view of the non-existence of an exclusive methodology in the investigation of SR, this research has defined a plural methodological approach, associating techniques of qualitative and quantitative nature, seeking a greater consistency in the analysis of data obtained and allowing for a better understanding of the object investigated.

The first stage had the objective of collecting the elements that constitute the content of representations. To this end an associative technique called Free Association was employed. For the analysis, a French software called EVOC was used, which permitted the quantification of the words evoked (evocation frequency) conducting the counting and crossing of the same, giving frequency average per population and the weighted mean by order of evocation. EVOC further showed the total number of words cited, the total number of different words, the list of words in alphabetical order and the table with the frequencies and averages.

The second stage had the objective of identifying and confirming the structure of the representation of child educators about their professional activity, by means of the technique of Item Hierarchy. This technique allowed the evidencing of a hierarchy in the representations where the research subjects directly conducted series of successive selections, thus yielding a classification in order of importance of the total of items proposed, which allowed the confirmation of the elements that constitute the Central Core and the Peripheral System. For the analysis the median position of each item was calculated, and next, the positive correlation between frequency – median position. This correlation presented itself as an indicator of prime importance to identify the central elements of the representation in the group studied.

The third phase consisted of a moment of recovery of the references to individual and collective experience in the context of production of the representation and of synthesis to find out about the contextualized functioning of the representation. For this purpose techniques of observation and semi-structured interviews were employed which permitted access to the discourse of people, the behaviour and social practices in which

the representations become manifest, seeking to identify the representations that are revealed in everyday life, with special care given to the systematic and rigorous registry of the same. The treatment of data consists of a comprehensive analysis, with the purpose of discriminating units of significance in the psychological perspective focusing upon the phenomenon researched.

3. Results

At the beginning of this study we were mobilized by the need to survey what was happening with a group of teachers who exercised their professional activity at a day-care centre due to our having perceived that the professional activity generated a certain uneasiness, which at some moments became apparent, reflected in the educator-child relationship and, mainly, in the work developed with the children. The hypothesis was created that the SR concerning the professional exercise in the day-care centre were based on the activity of care, which, according to studies and research, had crystallized within the infantile institutions in the process of construction of their history.

The research subjects consisted of a group of female teachers who carry out their activities in a day-care centre. Among these teachers, 64% have more than three years' professional experience at the day-care centre. However, 56% of these justify their being at the institution due to removal, remanagement, or lack of opportunity to work with another type of educational institution. Of this group of teachers, 79% in the age range between 31 and 50 years. Of the group, 68% are effective teachers.

Concerning the representations of this group about their professional activity, the results obtained as from the analyses conducted show significant data with regard to contents and structure of the representation. A total of two hundred and fifteen attributes were identified among the evocations, which were then organized into two large categories.

The educational category, with its sub-categories: personal, professional, social, ethical, mother and difficulties and the category care, with its sub-categories, kindness, lack of love and care. In terms of frequency the category educator-mother shows to be more representative with frequency of sixty-one, while the category educator-professional occupies a close second place with a frequency of sixty; and in third place, care-kindness, with a frequency of twenty-seven. In terms of average of evocation, the words composing the categories care-kindness and educator-difficulties are most promptly evoked with an average equal to 3.8.

With regard to structure, the elements of the central core are presented in a block of words that characterize the professional activity, related to the expected roles of mothers such as love, kindness, mother and baby-minder. Let us look at the structure:

Figure 1 - Structure of the social representation of the professional activity in the nursery as from the technique of free association to the inducing term: four-subdivision table.

AVERAGE OF MEAN WEIGHTED ORDERS			
FREQ. EVOC		MEAN EVOC	
13	MOTHER	2.46	
11	KINDNESS	3.90	
09	BABY-MINDER	2.22	
09	LOVE	3.11	
AVERAGE OF FREQUENCIES			
			MEAN
	04	AFFECTION	4.75
	03	ATTENTION	5.66
	05	UNDERSTAND.	4.60
	05	CREATIVITY	6.00
	05	CARE	4.40
	05	NURSE	4.60
	03	DOCTOR	5.00
	05	PSYCHOLOGIST	5.20
	03	RESPECT	4.33
	07	RESPONSIBILITY	4.28
	06	“AUNT”	5.66

The attributes mother and kindness had the highest frequency in the universe of the attributes evoked. However, as for the mean of the evocation order, the attribute baby-

minder was more promptly evoked, having an average of 2.22. This shows that the image of the professional in the day-care centre is still believed to be set up in the care format. This image has been built historically, while people, whether professionals or not, were appointed for the work in the day-care centre since this activity consisted of work directed mainly toward guard and care, and whose only aim was the survival of the small child.

Although the attribute baby-minder is not confirmed in the hierarchy activity, which was carried out by the teachers in the third stage of the research, it was very likely to form a heightening aspect of the uneasiness experienced by the teachers. This uneasiness, perceived by the researcher, revealed itself through dissatisfaction, too much seriousness and harshness in the teachers' manners, in their facial expressions and speech, giving a hint of a certain amount of discomfort for being in that environment, and in a daily six-hour non-stop routine with small children. The lack of job options, together with remanagement, can seriously compete for the reason of the uneasiness experienced by the teachers.

Another aspect that contributes to this discontentment may be related to the image of the day-care centre teacher, according to what teachers themselves said. 90% of them mentioned in the interviews that people usually regard them as baby-minders when they learn they work in a day-care centre, and even ask them whether they are or not teachers.

The attribute educator positions itself as an intermediary element in the representation, appearing in the first upper right periphery, and stands out in terms of a total frequency of ten, and an average of four in the evocation order. However, it is unable to crystallize and heighten itself when it is connected with the explanation for its choice, and with the context to which the representation is attached. It is clear that it concerns an element of the representation, which is likely to identify a reassessment of the reality for the day-care centre professional and the representation, since nowadays the principle of caring while educating is discussed and constitutes the proposal for day-care centre.

As for the block of words that forms the peripheral system of the representation, shown in figure 1, we have as significant the attributes responsibility, aunt, respect, creativity, affection, psychologist, doctor, attention, understanding and care. This block gives us an

idea of a mixture of elements that complement and contradict one another, with some aimed at caring, and others at the teacher's professional activity.

As the peripheral system allows the integration of contradictory elements to the representation without questioning the central core, the elements mentioned above show this contradiction as well as a duality in the feeling of these professionals concerning the professional activity in the day-care centre. At the same time that creativity, responsibility and professional behaviour are required, the activity in child education also consists of care, attention, respect and affection.

The data show that, in the content of the representation, functions directed either at caring or educating are reflected. The reflection of the indefiniteness in the role of the day-care centre nowadays, and therefore of the professional activity performed by the teachers therein is evident. The data confirm what Oliveira (1994) points out, that is, child education institutions find themselves in a state of indefiniteness concerning their role. However, there are signs that some changes have begun to occur, and conceiving the day-care centre as an educational space has only recently started.

The access to the inner organization of the representation has brought us some interesting data. In the central core attributes such as love, kindness, mother and baby-minder are concentrated. The data show that the representation is organized around a coherent core, built and established, as Abric declares (1994), by the historical, sociological and ideological conditions, being resistant to changes, and allowing the permanence of the representation to continue.

The attribute baby-minder confirms what has been historically set up for day-care centres since they have turned into spaces for the caring of small children, and pointed out in the discussion by researchers such as Kramer (1997), Cerisara (1996) and Oliveira (1994).

The attributes love, kindness and mother show the crystallization of qualities regarded as feminine and maternal. They confirm what Cerisara emphasized (1996), that is, the caring activity, built within the domestic sphere is taken to the public sphere, into the day-care centres, although this one has characteristics that differ from those of the homes. The data underline Louro's considerations (1997), according to which the female teaching profession had at its pillar the concept that women have a natural inclination to deal with children since they are their first and natural educators. In this

case, if maternity is in fact their primordial destiny, then the teaching profession also represents an extended form of maternity. The ideation of the vocation becomes clear when the group of teachers state that plenty of love, enjoyment of what one does and kindness toward the children are required to do a good job since most of the children in the day-care centre, according to the teachers' understanding, are emotionally deprived. Somehow they explain that the permanence of a professional in the day-care centre is directly linked to the identification with these attributes.

Interesting data also collected from the analyses refer to the intermediary elements of the representation. Elements that place themselves very close to the central core were located, and therefore may play a defensive role in it. They consist of the attributes dedication, patience and child. Connected with the supposed feminine characteristics required for the teaching profession, they represent elements that reassert the meaning and sense of the representation.

Attributes such as educator, friend, commitment and qualifications are also found as intermediary elements. These elements, which have different meanings from those located in the central core, express characteristics closer to the condition of being an educator. These sets are most likely related to the representation for, as Abric states (1994), they bring into the group's heterogeneity the reflection of their experiences and individual histories.

The peripheral system of the representation shows attributes such as affection, attention, understanding, creativity, care, nurse, doctor, psychologist, respect, responsibility and aunt. We can consider such attributes as elements that reflect actions developed in an immediate context within which the representations move. Caring is heightened with the attributes nurse, doctor, psychologist and care.

However, attributes such as creativity, respect and responsibility show that a relation with the daily work in the day-care centre is effectively established as well, whose function aims at a responsible and serious practice toward the children.

The access to the content and structure of the representations allowed us to observe that an integration of new elements to the representations has been gradually occurring, and that they place themselves at the level of the professional activity – being an educator. Most of this content presents attributes that emphasize the idea of the representation

being organized based on the concept that a day-care centre is the place where activities directed at child care are basically developed.

The attributes that aim at educating such as educator, having qualifications, creativity and responsibility are less representative in the inner organization of the representation and place themselves either as intermediary elements or elements of the peripheral system. The data show that this integration of new elements does not question the central core of the representation.

This process allows us to infer that the representations have been undergoing a transformation named by Abric (1994) as resistance transformation. In a resistance transformation, there is an integration of new elements to the peripheral system, new and contradictory practices can still be controlled by the peripheral system and classic defence mechanisms. It consists of a real, though superficial, transformation of the representation. The integration of new attributes that somehow contradicts what is the most relevant in the representation – the caring activity – became evident when the teachers justified the role of the day-care centre.

Nearly all of them were of the opinion that nowadays the day-care centre places itself as an institution whose role is to educate, and in some conditions it is also linked to teaching, and for this to happen a strong sense of responsibility is required since they work directly with small children. On the whole, the teachers' opinions also expressed that, linked to the educational work, dedication, understanding and kindness toward the children are needed for the development of the daily activities. In this sense, one should enjoy what one does, and love one's job.

Finally, it must be observed that the social representation about the activity in the day-care centre by the group of teachers is presented in a coherent manner as to what was historically established for the exercise of teaching and the role of a children's institution, more specifically the day-care centre. There are signs that new practices have started to appear in the day-care centre, not only those aimed at childcare, but also a concern and understanding that the day-care centre must be a place where the educational aspect is granted.

The data confirmed the proposition of this research, which was to verify whether the representations about the professional activity of children's teachers would still present today the elements placed at the caring activity level, and not at the educating-guiding

activity level. They also show that the attributes identified in this research bring meaning to the representation, revealing how strong the influence of the historically defined model for the professional activity of a child's teacher is, very similar to that of the maternal activity, demanding selflessness, and above all, immeasurable love for her profession and children.

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