

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SCHOOL: REPORT OF AN INSTRUMENTAL CASE STUDY¹

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ABSTRACT. Nonattendance, truancy and dropping out of school represent a social problem in legislation that regulates the universal access to education. The present study sought to identify social representations that a student, with a history of school nonattendance, had about the school and how much such meanings contributed to strengthen or weaken his school bond. For this purpose, a teenager in the 1st grade high school, aged 16, was the participant in the study. Data were collected by a semi-structured interview, free drawing, field diary and free observation. Information analysis was based on Creswell's proposal, from which three themes emerged: (a) School nonattendance as an adjunct to a context; (b) Rescue of virtuous potentialities: a look at singularity and (c) School as a place of strengthening virtuous potentialities. Our results indicated that the school was represented by the student in a different way according to each school experience. Thus, it is necessary for schools to be spaces that consider the singularities and needs of their students.

Keywords: School; case study; social representation.

REPRESENTAÇÃO SOCIAL DA ESCOLA: RELATO DE UM ESTUDO DE CASO INSTRUMENTAL

RESUMO. A infrequência, evasão e o abandono escolar se apresentam como um problema social apoiado em legislações que regulamentam a universalização do acesso escolar. A presente pesquisa tem como meta em identificar as representações sociais que um estudante, com histórico de infrequência escolar, possui a respeito da escola e de quanto essas significações contribuíram com o fortalecimento ou enfraquecimento de seu vínculo escolar. Para tanto, foi participante do estudo um adolescente do primeiro ano do ensino médio, com idade de 16 anos. Foram utilizados, como instrumento de coleta de dados, um roteiro de entrevista semiestruturada, desenho livre, diário de campo e observação livre. A análise das informações foi realizada baseando-se na proposta de Creswell da qual derivaram três temas: (a) a infrequência escolar como coadjuvante de um contexto; (b) o resgate das potencialidades virtuosas: um olhar para a singularidade e (c) escola como um lugar de fortalecimento das potencialidades virtuosas. Os resultados

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encontrados nesse estudo indicaram que a escola foi representada pelo estudante de forma distinta de acordo com cada vivência escolar. Desse modo, é necessário que as escolas sejam espaços que considerem as singularidades e necessidades de seus estudantes.

Palavras-chave: Escola; estudo de caso; representação social.

REPRESENTACIÓN SOCIAL DE LA ESCUELA: RELATO DE UN ESTUDIO DE CASO INSTRUMENTAL

RESUMEN. La infrecuencia, la evasión y el abandono escolar se presentan como un problema social en legislaciones que regulan una universalización del acceso escolar. La presente investigación buscó identificar cómo las representaciones sociales que tienen un historial de infrecuencia escolar, tienen un respeto por la escuela y en cuánto contribuyeron estos significados al fortalecimiento o debilitamiento de su vínculo escolar. Para ello, un adolescente participó en el estudio, 1er año de bachillerato, con edad de 16 años. Se utilizaron como instrumento de recopilación de datos, entrevista semiestructurada, diseño libre, diario de campo y observación libre. El análisis de la información se realizó a partir de la propuesta de Creswell, de la cual se derivaron tres temas: (a) Una infrecuencia escolar como coadyuvante de un contexto; (b) El rescate de las potencialidades virtuosas: una mirada a la singularidad y (c) La escuela como un lugar de fortalecimiento de las potencialidades virtuosas. Los resultados encontrados en ese estudio indicaron que la escuela fue representada por el estudiante de una manera diferente según la experiencia de cada escuela. De ese modo, se hace necesario que las escuelas son espacios que consideran las singularidades y necesidades de sus alumnos.

Palabras clave: Escuela, estudio de caso, representación social.

Introduction

School dropout has been the object of sociopolitical discussion by several professionals from different areas of knowledge, mainly in psychology and education. Discussions about school nonattendance and dropout must be discussed based on the public policy that states that education should be a right for every child and adolescent (Brasil, 1990). The understanding of the statute must be systemic. With this, due severity is attributed in the context of school failure, in which the protection actors (family, school, state and society) are failing to comply with the ECA, given the large number of students under 18 who do not have guaranteed access to school. The importance of studying school failure is a good perspective to reflect on the school relationship with the situations of vulnerability that many children and adolescents experience (Burgos et al., 2014).

The school is an important social institution, and is currently represented as a central environment in the child and adolescent protection network, in addition to being a space for learning and social interactions. In view of this, the school context emerges as a fundamental institution, and can be a context for the protection of children and adolescents, serving as a model from the relationships established in the school context and learning systematized and non-systematized contents (such as rules, behaviors, values).

On the other hand, the school can also serve as a context of risk to development, when there are relationships of violence in it or when the school represents a context that

does not consider the singularities of its students (Dessen & Polonia, 2007; Klein & Arantes, 2016; Rangel Júnior & Loos, 2011). Therefore, thinking about the role of the school and all the complexity of this context is essential, since school nonattendance is manifested in this territory. In addition, rethinking their meanings can help in interventions to strengthen bonds not only with the student, but also with their family members, with the aim of avoiding school dropout or failure (Foresti, Kujawa, & Patias, 2020). Each student relates to the school context in their own way, and this institution can be represented in different ways and meanings that will impact the school trajectory of each student, which can be an important aspect for nonattendance and possible school dropout. Thus, it becomes possible to understand the social representations of students about the school.

In general, the Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici, 1976) concerns the production of social knowledge. Knowledge, in this case, refers to any knowledge, especially knowledge that is produced in everyday life and that belongs to the lived world (Jovchelovitch, 2008). Social Representations (SR) are collectively produced and contribute to the formation of behaviors, serving as a guide for the action and guidance of individuals and groups in their practices (Abric, 1998). A social representation is an organized collection of information, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a particular object. Socially produced, it is strongly marked by values corresponding to the socio-ideological system and the history of the group that conveys it, for which it constitutes an essential element of their worldview (Abric, 1998).

Social Representations (SR) have an autonomous psychological context, typical of society and culture, guide the way of naming and defining the different aspects of everyday reality, in the way of interpreting and determining practices (Jodelet, 2001). People build SRs because of the need to understand the world around them. Therefore, this theory seeks to understand the interference that may exist in the practices of the subjects involved (Jodelet, 2001).

The present study presents a concern with the historical dimension of the SRs considering the public involved - student with school nonattendance - and the object of investigation - the school. Therefore, the present study sought to identify the social representations that a student, with a history of school nonattendance, had about the school and how much these meanings contributed to strengthen or weaken his school bond.

Method

Design

This was a qualitative study, characterized as an instrumental case study. This method was used to better understand the question raised in the research and to further investigate the 'how' or 'why' of the phenomenon investigated (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2015). In the instrumental case study, the interest lies in understanding a broader problem from the particular case, that is, the case is the vehicle to understand or elucidate a problem that not only affects the case studied, but others, in this sense the case works as an instrument (Meirinhos & Osório, 2016).

Participants

Initially, three focus group meetings were held with 1st grade high school students who were registered with Notification Card for Students with Irregular School Attendance (FICAI). Five students participated in this initial moment. After these meetings, students

were invited to participate in another moment with the researcher, where they could share experiences about the school and their life stories. Only one student showed interest and, considering the inclusion criteria, he was selected to participate.

The inclusion criteria to participate in this study were: to be between twelve and twenty-one years of age, to have registration in the FICAI, to have participated in the focus group and to have consent from parents and/or other guardians, by signing the Informed Consent (IC) and the student's assent by signing the Informed Assent (IA).

The selected student, who will be named Luís (fictitious name), was 16 years old, was in the 1st grade high school and failed in 2017. During this school period, he was registered at FICAI for recurring absences and without justifications. Luís moved to the current city where he has lived for two years and lives in a popular condominium, in a neighborhood away from the school. He says he walks to school because he cannot wake up in time to take the bus. He resides with his older brother and sister. His parents live in a town near the Uruguayan border and only meet once a year.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview script: three meetings were held for the interview. The objective was to deepen the information the student brought in the focus group, directing by categories about his life history and experiences with the school, such as "What do you think about your life project?" [sic], "What do you attribute that you started to study more?" [sic]. In addition, a free-drawing technique was used during the interview. This technique was used as an initial strategy to start conversation and access content through production and expression through images and reflections on what was drawn. The instruction to perform the free drawing was: "What does the school represent for you in your life story?". This technique was reapplied in the first meeting and reapplied in the last one.

Interview with the teacher: In order to obtain more information about the case, an open interview was carried out with the student's Karate teacher, which made it possible to understand an important point for Luís, his participation and significance of the Karate project. We used questions such as, "What do you think about the relationship between family and school, currently?", "In what way do you believe that Karate contributes to the school?".

Field diary and free observation: these instruments were used as complementary techniques to gather more information and understand the case. The objective of observation and recording in a field diary was to capture information and perceptions about the student's context at school and about his life history. Still, observation can be considered as a technique for collecting information and a complementary step to the other procedures and instruments used (Gil, 2008). The field diary is useful for understanding feelings and perceptions (Scheinvar & Nascimento, 2017). These strategies are some of the main sources used to collect information, in case studies, to triangulate information sources (Creswell, 2010; Yin, 2015). The free observations took place during the researcher's participation and permanence at the school (in breaks, in the secretariat, in the waiting room) and during the interviews with Luís and the teacher, with subsequent description of the researcher's observations and feelings in a field diary.

Procedures and ethical considerations

First, the project of which this study is part, 'Public security policies: psychology interventions in socioeducation', was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of

IMED, under Opinion 2.158.303. Soon after, contact was made with the school, via telephone and also in person. The research was conducted in a school in the northern mesoregion of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The period of execution of the research was from April to July 2018.

Initially, three focus group meetings were held, involving the participation of five students. After the meetings with the group, in which Luís participated, three individual meetings were held, with the application of a semi-structured interview, free observation and a field diary with Luís. The participant chose to participate in the interviews in a space provided by the school, as he felt more comfortable. There was also a meeting held at Luís' place of residence.

From the information reported, it was realized the need to know the Karate school and the teacher who coordinates this project and teaches the classes. Thus, an open interview was carried out with this professional, for a better understanding of the case. With the exception of free observation and field diary, the other information collection strategies were recorded, with the prior authorization of the participant, by signing the Informed Consent (IC), prepared according to the rules and guidelines of Resolution 466/2012 and Resolution 510/2016 of the National Health Council (Brasil, 2016). Afterwards, all the information was transcribed in full by the researcher who performed the data collection, for better retrieval.

Regarding the student, his anonymity was guaranteed by the adoption of a fictitious name (Luís) in the quotations of his speeches. The participant was informed about the objectives and methods of the research, risks and benefits, confidentiality and secrecy, the possibility of withdrawing at any time, in addition to the return and communication of the results. After explaining the topics, the person responsible registered the approval by signing the IC and the adolescent signed the Informed Assent (IA).

Information analysis

For the analysis of the information, the qualitative analysis proposed by Creswell (2010) was adopted, which was carried out through six steps: 1) Organization of the information collected through the transcription of interviews and field notes; 2) Organization of information by reading all material for an understanding of the general meaning found; 3) Coding from text extractions resulting from the information collected; 4) Production of thematic categories; 5) Reference to excerpts from participants' speeches according to each category; 6) Extraction of meanings from information from excerpts from interviews, field diaries and other information collected with the instruments, relating to theoretical contributions regarding the themes found. From the analysis, three thematic categories/nucleus of meaning and a sub-theme emerged: (a) School attendance as an adjunct to a context; (b) The rescue of virtuous potentialities; (c) School as a place of virtuous potentialities. The first thematic category was broken down into a sub-theme: Bullying and family.

Results and discussion

In general, Luís' school record showed school nonattendance in 2017, through the issuance of the FICAI and his subsequent grade failure. Free observations of the school context and subsequent field diary suggested, among some teachers, prejudiced perceptions about Luís as a student through phrases such as: "[...] this student is hopeless" [sic], "[...] is lost" [sic]. However, there were also perceptions that reveal the

opposite: “[...] from 2018 onwards Luís is an exemplary student” [sic]. The teachers’ speeches also revealed that the student started to attend classes, adapted to the school’s rules and carried out the proposed activities with enthusiasm. These changes in behavior were potentiated by experiences that helped him to (re)signify the school in his life history, mainly from his entry into Karate. Luís’ entrance into this project strengthened positive aspects about himself and the school. On the other hand, the school finds it difficult to intensify Luís’ potentialities, considering the evaluation – scores – as a parameter of a ‘good student’.

When Luís participated in the Focus Group, prior to this individual work, about his history with the school, and was asked about what the school represented for him, he said: “I have been studying for ten years and no one has ever asked me [...] what I think of the school” [sic]. During the meetings, the student pointed out, when asked about what the school represents, “I never thought about it” [sic]. Perhaps this aspect can be thought of through the impossibility of thinking about the school in his own life, since there were other people (teachers) who thought about it, highlighting his incompatibility with the school. In 2018, Luís says that he begins to rethink the fact of “[...] being someone” [sic], associating this representation with school, a space that allows an identity. As Luís exposed his story, it was noticed how much the representations of the school were intertwined with his life story and previous experiences at school.

School nonattendance as an adjunct to a context

This category presents the representation of the school for Luís, according to his experiences in general, the school is presented in different ways according to two different moments of his life context: his experiences prior to the period of nonattendance and those he experiences currently, in which he came to be characterized as an exemplary student. In both moments, the emphasis of his speech was not on his school failure, but on situations that happened in his daily life at school and that had as a background the exposure to situations of bullying, urban violence, financial and family difficulties.

With regard to violence, according to the literature, in its various forms of expression, it can trigger harmful effects on the lives of victims, such as impairment in the teaching-learning process, fear or unwillingness to go to school, abandonment of studies and, in some cases, the development of depressive disorder, inability to learn, and feelings of guilt (Pezzi & Marin, 2017).

In addition, family is the first environment in which children and adolescents participate, having a strong influence on their children’s behavior throughout their lives, as they learn different ways of existing, seeing the world and building their social relationships. In addition to being responsible for transmitting values, beliefs, ideas, meanings that are present in society (Dessen & Polonia, 2007), they can influence school performance and the perception that children and adolescents have about school, from the point of view of their family of origin (Filho & Araújo, 2017; Patias, Abaid, & Gabriel, 2011).

Bullying and family

In the context prior to the period of nonattendance, Luís reported several aspects related to the practices of violence, such as bullying. In one of his accounts, he described a situation that can be classified as bullying. In the situation, Luís was visibly embarrassed and emotional, he said it was “[...] difficult to remember that” [sic]. The school, in this context, gained meanings linked to suffering, a place of difficult coexistence. In addition, there were few actions by the school that made it possible to reduce or stop these practices of violence, which, according to him, were recurrent. The school trajectory

became difficult, which may have hampered Luís' school attendance and these difficulties experienced are problems that may be directly associated with the student's relationship with the school, indicating that it could be avoided by actions carried out at the school management level (Burgos et al., 2014). In this sense, bullying is a complex phenomenon and a frequent reality in Brazilian schools. It produces a series of mental health consequences for both victims and witnesses of this type of violence (Schultz et al., 2012).

When asking Luís to make a free drawing about what the school represented for him in the period before he was characterized as non-attending, he drew a situation of violence (in black and white) in which a girl was a victim of bullying. In this drawing, Luís wrote, behind the drawing of the bullying victim, the words: 'Exclusion' and 'Violence', characterizing the school context as a place that excludes and violates rights. Luís added that these topics were frequently debated by the teachers, but, in his perception, the debates were not effective. In fact, the construction of a democratic and inclusive school environment demands a collective construction that must involve several school actors so that students perceive the meaning of being at school (Marques & Castanho, 2011). Furthermore, Luís represented the school as a place "[...] totally falling apart" [sic], difficult to access and impoverished (not only as a physical structure), but mainly of meaning and attribution of meaning to his life.

The lack of school attendance for Luís was not his biggest problem at school and in his life. To a certain extent, it served him as a protection from the aggressions and humiliations he was subjected to at school. Thus, nonattendance can be re-signified as a product resulting from his experiences, experiences of moving to another city and family relationships. In this sense, in the period in which he was non-attending, Luís reported that he was going through "[...] two difficult moments" [sic], the first being related to the fact of having lost his "[...] second mother" [sic], his sister's ex-girlfriend, which was a reference for him. He said that with the loss of his 'second mother' he was "[...] lost, not knowing what to do" [sic].

The second moment was when he moved to his current address with his siblings, which caused him to physically distance himself from his parents, being a moment of great suffering. Moving to another city and her sister's school nonattendance contributed to his lack of interest and later school nonattendance. After the report that none of his siblings have completed high school, related to his sister's nonattendance, it seems to make sense that Luís did not attend school, thus not completing high school and following in his siblings' footsteps. In this sense, Luís' actions seem to be related to family loyalty, that is, going to school goes against the 'rule' of the family system, which, in addition, states that "[...] work must come first" [sic].

However, in the following year, Luís went through life changes that culminated in his return to school, maintaining school attendance. His attitude towards the school environment began to present itself in a positive way, showing pride in the good scores present in the 'school report card'. The change from the red score to the blue score carries a sense of decision and autonomy, and was common the association between attending school and karate classes, which according to him "[...] helped a lot to think, you know, to make that decision [...] that was quite important" [sic].

With regard to the family, the literature has reported that in this context there is the transmission of values, dreams, perspectives and patterns of relationships. Still, the family can be a context of devaluation of the potential of its members, fostering the feeling of belonging, the search for solutions and shared activities. However, the family often constitutes a dysfunctional support network (Dessen & Polonia, 2007). In this regard, Luís

mentions that there was support and monitoring of his school activities from a 'second mother' (e.g.: sister's girlfriend), and the separation that occurred made it impossible to provide instrumental and emotional support for school activities. Nevertheless, his participation in Karate provided indirect support, redirecting representations about the school and his life projects.

Rescue of virtuous potentialities

This category presents the research results related to the potentialities present in the history and relationships that Luís established with significant people, which allow the re-signification of the school and his life projects. Each subject establishes their own life trajectories, based on the choices and decisions they make. The small achievements arising from everyday life can, in this sense, become a reason for pride and enthusiasm, at the same time that obligations can acquire meanings that produce discomfort for subjects and their perspective on the world (Arantes, Pinheiro, & Gomes, 2019). An aspect that Luís often commented on was his participation in Karate and how much the figure of Sensei [teacher] and the classes "[...] were game changers" [sic], making him reflect on his life, attend school and assign to it a positive representation.

Undeniably, the free observations that were carried out in a Karate class had remarkable characteristics. The group that participated there, for the most part, was made up of teenagers. The observed behaviors were: interaction between group members, attentive listening to the authority figure (teacher), actions that followed the instructions received, demonstrations of respect for Karate norms and Sensei, in addition to respect for not only physical differences (presence of a person with a disability in the group), but also in relation to the life stories of their group colleagues. Still, there was discipline, knowledge about another culture and art, activity that demanded concentration and strength, and above all a pleasure to be there. In this regard, the literature has revealed that Karate serves as a communicative tool capable of working with diverse and comprehensive themes and subjects of everyday life. Its use is intended to inform the student about issues necessary for living in society, such as compliance with norms and rules (Cantanhede, Marques, Nogueira, Souza & Reis, 2010; Tavares & Lopes, 2014).

According to all these characteristics, it is understood the importance karate has in Luís' life, allowing for the re-signification of the school, his history and life projects. So, it seems that participation in Karate made possible the reinterpretation, re-signification of his life and school. Luís referred to the change in scores in the subjects as a result of his participation in Karate, which was, for him "[...] a game changer" [sic], yet, participation in the group made it possible for him to return to school and a new bond, re-signified, with the institution.

It is understood that the essence of the change is not in the participation in Karate classes, but in the relationships and rules that permeate and are part of this type of group. During the classes there was the teacher (Sensei) who believed in his potential, looking at him as a subject with a history and potential. This aspect is recurrent in Luís' speech, which seems to represent the figure of the teacher as a hope, legitimizing a possibility of looking to the future, to his life projects.

Representation produces symbols and its strength lies in the ability to give meaning, to signify. It works by displacing something in place of something, that is, this displacement of objects provides a new arrangement. This displacement of meanings of objects also demonstrates the origin between the construction of the symbolic, art and culture (Jovchelovitch, 2008). Luís made this displacement of meaning. In his report, he said that

school rules are important, that he was no longer a victim of bullying at school. In this re-signification of the meanings of the school and of his life, Luís managed to understand the school and the Karate classes as spaces that allow and enable the development of his potentialities.

From the re-significations, one of Luís' life projects is to attend a college of Accounting Sciences and work to be able to maintain his studies, have his material goods and “[...] be someone” [sic]. The life project is a protective aspect of human development, which encompasses constructions about oneself and the world and allows people to establish guidelines for their own life journeys (Arantes et al., 2019; Nascimento, 2006).

School as a place of virtuous potentialities

This category presents the new representations that Luís had about the school. In this new representation of the school, Luís understood the institution as a place of possibilities, which fulfills a role that meets his life project. When requesting the technique of free drawing about what he thought the school represented for him nowadays, he made a very colorful drawing, reproducing a clipping of the work of Pablo Picasso called ‘Guernica’, from 1937. This work portrays, generally speaking, the period of the Second World War when a city in Spain called Guernica was bombed. The work depicts the dramatic moment and in the middle of the whole scene, there is the figure of a hand holding a sword and a flower. Luís represented the school from this drawing, adding by hand a cross (representing religion at school), a pencil (representing education) and a cigarette (representing the existence of drugs in everyday life around the school). According to him, “[...] school is that flower” [sic]. In this drawing, Luís seems to have represented the events he experienced as difficult (represented by the war) and his hope for better days of growth and flowering (flower).

Associated with the drawing, his account represented the school as a place of possibilities and necessary for this moment in his life. The experiences and knowledge that students have from their experiences and who live informally in the school context should not be neglected, but considered. For Luís, an ideal school is a school without violence, which allows spaces for dialogue with students. The representation of the ideal school is the school where you study. The way in which the school is perceived significantly influences the expectations that students have about their future. The more positive the relationship with the school, the higher the expectations of future achievement. In view of this, it is important to perceive the school as a space of protection, considering all those involved in this environment, from teachers, technicians, students, their families and community (Alves, Zappe, Patias, & Dell’Aglío, 2015).

In his speech, Luís mentioned that the school has principles, norms and a religious orientation and practice (represented by the cross in the drawing). For him, these are values with which he identifies, exerting a feeling of acceptance and meaning in being in this context. However, he also understands and refers to negative aspects of the institution, such as drug consumption in the surroundings of the institution.

Final considerations

The present study sought to identify the social representations that a student, with a history of school nonattendance, had about the school and how much these meanings contributed to strengthen or weaken his school bond. Luís' representations about the school were diversified, according to his school and family experiences, indicating that,

when there is the presence of an affectionate and interested look in the history and future of a subject, there is the presence of humanization and legitimacy. The insertion of Luís in Karate, along with the group's relationships, with the teacher and the group's rules, helped in the re-signification of the school, as a space for identification and construction of his life projects.

In this way, Luís represented the school in a different way – a hostile, meaningless place and, currently, as a place of possibilities. The representations that students have about the school is influenced by countless experiences of a subject, and this representation will reflect on the way the student relates to learning and to school. Therefore, in this study, we sought to understand school nonattendance and its relationship with representations from a case study, understanding the limitations regarding the understanding of school nonattendance, as it is a complex aspect, influenced by experiences and individual representation, but also by the social, economic and historical context.

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