

*A Cultural-Historical Approach*

# Learning in Classrooms



*Edited by Mariane Hedegaard*

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# 15 The Construction of Contemporary Subjectivity: Interactions between Knowledge and School Environment

*Solange Jobim e Souza*

The aim of this article is to search for an understanding of the experience that children have with school in the contemporary world. To achieve this, we have taken into account the dialogue that occurred between adults and children in the context of research into the subjects of school environment and knowledge. It is important to say that we consider language as the locus in which we produce meaning from our experience, which in turn can be shared with others.

In this study we found that ambiguousness and the verging and diverging, which characterise both the child and adult discourses, show us, on the one hand, an idealisation of this place called school but, on the other hand, towards the classical vision of the ideal place. We grasp in the spoken word the movements of building and unbuilding the meanings attributed not only to the school, but also to the institutions which form the scenery of political and cultural experiences in a given society. Nevertheless, it is also in and by the word that we can engineer the most significant social changes which will give a new meaning and transform human experience, introducing new challenges to be successfully overcome in the near future.

\* This text was produced during the research project 'Contemporary Subjectivities: Childhood and Adolescence in Consumer Society', financed by CNP (National Research Council) and FAPERJ (State of Rio de Janeiro Research Council). The first part of the project, 'Childhood in Modern Times', was written in partnership with Rita Mariana Ribes Pereira, with whom I have worked and studied on this theme, both in research and in a course for pre-school teachers which we held together at PUC Rio (Catholic University of Rio). I would like to explain that the dialogues with the children that are presented in this study were taken from interviews made for the videotext 'Once Upon a Time ... a School', produced in 1997 by the Psychology Department at PUC Rio. This videotext was written and directed by Solange Jobim e Souza, Maria Florentina Camerini and Maria Cecília Moraes.

First, we discuss and criticise the rationalised concept of childhood which, due to the Enlightenment approach, has greatly influenced developmental psychology in modern times. Afterwards, as a way of building new paradigms to answer our questions in a more satisfactory way, we took up the challenge of assuming a social and historical concept of the child and used the dialogical approach in our interview with children. It is understandable that the child needs the adult, but it is essential that we recognise that the adult also needs the child, because only then will it be possible to build up a better and deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of the contemporary world. We are convinced that talking with the child presents an opportunity for us to recover by way of the child's point of view, a critical view of all that is lacking in our culture.

### **Childhood in Modern Times**

The production of knowledge about childhood is closely linked to the social place the child holds in relation to 'other people'. Our initial concern, therefore, is to reveal and emphasise transformations and orientations on the concept of childhood throughout time. Only then, can we grasp the necessary theoretical tools to help understand the experience of 'being a child' and the vicissitudes that childhood represents in the contemporary world. Of course, each period of time expresses its ideals and expectations in relation to children, and this will bring consequences in the formation of the individual. To make it clearer, the production and consumption of concepts about childhood by society as a whole will interfere directly with the behaviour of children, adolescents and adults. Their acts and attitudes will be modelled in accordance with the expectations generated by the discourse which will exist among people. These expectations will correspond to the cultural, political and economic interests of a broader social context (Jobim e Souza 1997).

In the Enlightenment approach, the child is seen in a paradoxical way. Although childhood is the time and place for the passions, desires and experience itself that precede the limits imposed by word and reason, it is also a potential depository for something which will be revealed in the future—that is, the way in which we become adults endowed with reason. As a consequence, the task of transforming these small 'imperfect beings' into men/women endowed with language and logos—future citizens who are responsible, independent and self-sufficient, is left to education. Education



plain, however, that although the Enlightenment has placed the child in a conflicting situation between incompetence and at the same time the denial of his/her presumed condition of incompleteness, it is thanks to the Enlightenment ideas that the child was actually recognised as a subject of study by science. The modern concept of science admits truth as certainty, and takes responsibility in explaining, organising, filing and rationalising the 'real' and the 'being' in their wholeness. It is within this context that science radically transforms the feelings of modern people in relation to childhood, and make it an object of research.

When trying to free men from the evil that ignorance or 'not knowing' represents, and transforming them into lords of the world via reason, the Enlightenment also inaugurated concern with the child and his/her formation. This concern, although at a pioneer stage, had no intention of dealing with the peculiarities of this period of life; on the contrary, it is denied, since the real interest was the 'small adult', the man of tomorrow. Therefore, at that time, childhood was understood as an ephemeral, temporary and transitory stage that must be accelerated. To grow up means to become a being of reason, and this maturation, like fruit in a hothouse, must be hastened (Nunes & Pereira 1996).

The so-called modern life is structured under the sign of reason. The idea of progress, brought forward by the industrial revolution and by Darwin's theory of evolution, is strengthened by monopolist capitalism and supported by positivist theories. History is seen as a chain of successive well-defined dimensions — past, present and future — crystallised by the laws of casualness and unfolded by the concepts of cause and consequence. Therefore, 'social reality is submitted to a method which claims to be universal and unitary: the scientific method, organised by non-social procedures' (Matos 1989). The idea of a directive science will take us, necessarily, to forecasting time, history and life, because, if the human social experience allows itself to be held captive by an objective science, what is settled is the idea that any process can be decided beforehand (Horkheimer and Adorno 1986). When we try an approximation between the course of the psychology of development and the Enlightenment ideas, we come to a fundamental question: up to which extent would the phases or stages in the development of the child, described according to the psychological theories, be forging an excessive rationalisation of childhood and, in this manner, engineering a developmentalist speech, supported by psychological science, that establishes ways and possibilities on whose basis human life might make sense.

The way in which we relate to childhood reveals the forms of control of the social history of contemporary individuals. The need to control the future causes existence itself to be absolutely submitted to foreknowledge. Past, present and future unfold in phases, reinforcing the idea of a previously decided linear process. Each phase corresponds to a precise behaviour and through this timely relationship the criteria of 'normality' and of the 'good course' of development itself are constructed. Science and specialised knowledge take on the role of 'explaining' childhood and establishing the criteria to legitimate 'good' education for the child. Therefore, the psychologist, the psycho-pedagogue, the language therapist, the psychometrist, the paediatrician, and even the media professionals, take on the role of characterising the child and his/her needs, defining educational goals and offering essential subsidies for social regulation to discipline the course of life. As a continuation of the principle according to which science is the criterion of truth, the authority is given to the specialist to produce 'truths' about child education in modern times. The family is left with a growing insecurity and uncertainty about their role in the orientation of the education of their children.

The psychology of development has taken charge of supporting, and divulging this position, as Buck-Morss (1987) exposes, as well as 'invigilating' human development, through pre-conceived rules which stimulate maturation, selecting and adapting the 'proper' activities for each stage in the development of the child. What becomes evident, much more than understanding and explaining human development, is the rationalisation of childhood legitimated by scientific knowledge. That which could be understood as the building-up of the individual by means of his/her social historical insertion, is adulterated in a process of 'submission' of the child to a scientific, universalising and a-historical model of development. And, although we question the limitations imposed by this position, we admit the difficulty in escaping it, as we are constantly surprised and concerned when life challenges the rule: 'Two years old and still can't talk?', 'Still can't pee in the potty!', 'This is no child business', 'You're too old for that ...', 'What will you be when you grow up?' etc. These and many other sentences follow us since birth and threaten us as an accelerator that *tic-tacks* time. Grow up! Hurry! Hurry, a lot of hurry ...

To understand contemporary experience we must go back to the historical and philosophical paradigms that orient the different concepts of childhood throughout time. The more everyday life becomes complex, the more

we feel the need to equate it or make a problem out of it, taking into consideration the increasing number of types of behaviour and social practices that feed the emerging culture. Our concern is to build up an understanding of the contemporary experience of childhood which will allow us to redefine the social place occupied by the individuals in the complex web of intersubjective and social-ideological relationships of which they are made.

### **Using a Dialogical Approach to do Research with Children**

The child is not tomorrow: he/she is today — now — a being who participates in the construction of the history and culture of the time. Nevertheless, one of the main problems we have to face today is the crystallisation of concepts, world views and interpretations of the child which consider him/her as an abstract form, a category separated from social context, resistant to class relations, nothing but an organism in the process of development and socialisation, a 'someone to-be' in the distant future.

To think of the child in this way makes it impossible to have a true dialogue with him/her, or better, makes it impossible to have that dialogue in which he/she shows the social and cultural spaces from whence his/her voice and desire arise in confronting the experience gathered to date. The child must not be seen as an object but, rather, as an individual who will build up a new knowledge from her interaction with adults.

Our analysis takes into consideration that the child's oral manifestation, as well as the adult's, is a result of conversation between the two. It is influenced by the context of its production, apart from other factors that precede the meeting between the child and the adult, but which, in a certain sense, become present at the time of the interview, and are up-dated by the tension of that moment. We understand each interview as the expression of a discourse, both singular and collective. We try, in this way, to unbuild the polarity *individual versus social*, since the individual is made *of* and *by* the language and is, therefore, a being who is built up in the confrontation with the other and with the cultural productions of his time.

As we reflect upon this understanding of childhood, we come to a methodological question related to research in the area of psychology and, consequently, with the need to redefine the social place the child holds in his/her interaction with the adult within this context. The way in which we think and understand the discourse that arises from an interview, shows us that this material does not come in a unilateral way, as it is not offered as a

product from the child or the adult alone and, therefore, made of 'data' of simple information that will build a model to explain childhood. On the contrary, we understand the situation of the interview as a moment in which the construction of a conversation happens, and it will reveal the various senses which arise in that specific dialogue situation, and in that way setting limits to part of the aspects which exist in the everyday experience of the interlocutors regarding the theme in question. So, the analysis itself of this discursive material represents a mode of conversation that, far from trying to find absolute interpretations in the selected fragments, will try to unveil the possible senses which arise from this meeting of child and adult, and, in this way, amplify and diversify the ways of understanding a specific cultural phenomenon. Our proposal for analysis is, more than anything, an attempt to feed the discussions about the contemporary and the social, political and ideological place that the individuals — adults and children — hold in this configuration. It is during the flow of verbal interaction that the word is changed and gains different meanings according to the context in which it appears. Constituted by the phenomenon of social interaction, the dialogue reveals itself as a kind of link between language and life (Bakhtin 1981, 1985).

All spheres of human activity are related to the use of language. Even when the character and the form that the language takes in everyday social relations are as multiple as the human activities themselves, one cannot deny the existence of systematic ways of using the language in daily social life, which we call 'discursive styles' (Bakhtin 1985). Therefore, to apprehend and interpret the 'discursive styles' which appear in everyday life is to admit language as a mediator of the historical and cultural movements and of the place the individual holds in this intermediation.

The child holds a knowledge which must be taken into consideration. Therefore, the first step for the adult would be to invert the position in relation to the child, that is, have the child as a partner in the search for a deeper understanding of the experience that both of them share every day. This means that instead of assuming that adult knowledge is necessarily superior to that of the child, one assumes that both the child and the adult bear distinct possibilities of understanding the shared experiences. These differences enrich our understanding and broaden our critical view of daily life in the intersubjective relations between children and adults. The building up of the individual, within this perspective, is a consequence of the meanings that are built through verbal exchanges in various everyday situations.

However, we must say that each specific context is responsible for the course the dialogue takes in a given interview, and that both the child's and the adult's utterances are always situated in the context which originated them. Each period in time and each social group have their own types of discourse which work as a mirror, reflecting and refracting everyday life. The word is the revelation of a space in which the fundamental values of a given society explain and confront each other. The text of the interviews puts us face-to-face with the world as we have built and idealised it, whether in its perverse or stigmatised aspects, or in its critical and transforming dimension of the established order. Therefore, to talk with the child is an opportunity for us to recover, through the child's viewpoint, a critical view of the deficiencies in our culture.

The interviews that we have done during the research work will be analysed in the next section. The children who were interviewed are aged between 7 and 12, come from different social layers and study at state or private schools. We have chosen to leave this information open, since we believe that the children's texts make the reader ask this kind of question and stimulate his interpretation of the dialogues. We do not intend to place the children's discourses into pre-established categories, limiting the origin of these utterances by formal socially settled aspects, and thus weakening the interpretation. Our analysis aims at interpreting the flow of the social discourse, and the interpretation it involves tries to save what 'is said' from the possibility of becoming extinct and fixing it in researchable forms. It is important to say that we are not looking for a consensus, but a refining of the debate (Geertz 1989).

### **What Children and Adults Say About School and Knowledge**

During the interviews, the issue of school is inevitably present in conversations between adults and children. If we find what should seem so obvious to be strange, it would be relevant to ask why the issue is so recurrent. This issue of school was sometimes brought up by the child, but, when this did not happen, the adult would always end up talking about it. Since the interviews did not follow a pre-determined or fixed route, we find the recurrence of a certain subject quite significant. The dialogue that takes place, whether it was started by the adult or the child, in this specific context, takes us to a position which is clearly identified by the interlocutors — 'a child's place is in school'. We are not questioning the necessity of school, but calling,

attention to the fact that this imposition is not enough to ensure that it fulfills its function. Today, the decreased interest we witness in relation to the school experience is as evident as the school being obligatory. Perhaps, because school is compulsory, meaning the individual cannot exert his 'free will', conversation on this subject almost inevitably ends up dealing with whether one 'likes' or 'doesn't like' school and the activities that take place there every day.

Adult 1: Do you like to study or do you think it is boring?

Child: Oh, so-so. I like it. I mean, I don't really like it, but I study. I don't like and like it.

Adult: How is that?

Child: It's like this: sometimes I have a class that's good, sometimes it's a difficult class ...

...

Adult: When you are at school, what is your day like?

Child: Everything's boring.

Adult: Is that so? Why?

Child: Because I don't like to stay in school.

Adult: Don't you?

Child: No. It's very boring to do school work.

...

Adult: Do you like to study?

Child: Is this some kind of joke? I hate to study. I detest it.

...

Adult: Your school, what's it like? Do you like it there?

Child: Yes.

In these dialogues, it becomes evident that the adult wishes to find out how the child feels about and interprets 'school obligation'. He wants to know if in that space the opportunities of pleasure and of play are preserved, or if pleasure and obligation are compatible experiences. On her part, the child is clear about it: the school becomes negative, a place of displeasure, when associated with study, but positive, when seen as a space where you can make friends, play and subvert the established order. In that sense, pleasure is often related to school activities when it arises from friendship and games.

- Adult 2: What is your class at school like?  
Child: A real mess. I like it.  
Adult: Do you like messing around?  
Child: Love it.  
Adult: Do the teachers complain?  
Child: They do, but we don't care (laughter).  
...  
Adult: What do you like best at your school? What's the best?  
Child: Friends, of course.  
...  
Adult: And what is it like in school?  
Child: Oh, it's very good.  
Child: I play ping-pong, ball, volleyball ...  
Child: I play football.

Notice that a series of activities are mentioned which are part of children's life both in and out of school. However, whilst the emphasis during the conversation should be on the school activity. The interview, at some moments, goes down other paths and the conversation gets 'off the track'. We get the idea that, despite the effort the adult makes to keep the conversation in a certain direction, the other topics finally take the place which 'should' belong to the school.

- Adult 3: Talk a little about your day. What do you do?  
Child: I study, mm ... on Tuesday, I play ball at half-past-one, mm ... on Wednesday I play ball at five on the indoors field (...) Sometimes I go to the street market, then I give some money to my mother (...) I play capoeira at half-past-seven with mestre Garrincha. Sometimes I make a show, the guys call me (...)  
Adult: Oh! And where do you study?  
...  
Adult: Would you like to say something about school. You've said almost nothing about what you think of your school?  
Child: I always when ... on Fridays and Saturdays, I go to parties. I like funk parties. They are very good.  
Adult: I had asked about school (laughter). You talked about parties ...  
Child: School? Oh, school isn't very good, no. Nearly every day we get rice meal as a snack. That's a horrible snack. Tasteless rice.

The adult asks the child about her studies, which indicates the value he places on knowledge and intellectual development. The child, however, wants to show the adult the social and affective spaces from where she extracts her desires and her pleasure. In the emotions which arise, adult and child struggle to establish a basis of mutual understanding, but unsuccessfully. Therefore, in the interview situation, the theme is not an isolated manifestation from the interlocutors' point of view; it takes on the form that was possible in that specific context.

An issue that stands out is the fact that everyday school activities are felt and explained within a fundamental scission: studying versus playing, making friends, practising sports, etc. At certain moments during the interview, it becomes evident that the decision as to whether the school is good, bad or indifferent is much more a question related to social contacts, leisure activities or the guarantee of a concrete subsistence (to feed the children at school) than to the, let's say, more official function of the school, which is to teach specific syllabuses and allow a certain social upgrading through study. However, even if 'studying' does not mean personal pleasure, we realise in the discourse, both by the adult and by the child, that it means the 'promise of a future'. Study is worshipped as being a means of access to the place held by the adult, further on, since it is study that will allow 'salary, dignified and honest work, a profession' (sic). In such moments, the children show a possible identification with the adult through positive identification with the school.

Anyway, how is knowledge built in school? How do children refer to the teacher and talk about the knowledge produced in school? The best way to find out about this is to let the child answer it.

Adult 4: What is a good class like?

Child: It's when the teacher asks me to write on the board the names of the people who are talking.

Adult: Write names on the board?

Child: It's like this: the teacher says to me 'Evandro, take a piece of chalk from the box and write the names of those who are talking, and not paying attention. The people you write on the board will have to do verbs and be punished.'

Adult: And do you like that?



Child: Sure! I don't have to do anything, just write the names on the board. I get everyone into trouble. They just have to open their mouths and I write their names on the board.

Adult: What about you? Don't you ever talk?

Child: I used to talk a bit in second grade and in first grade. Then the teacher punished me by making me do the multiplication chart on the board, so never again.

...

Child: This is the first test I get a *D* in.

Adult: So, the first. Is it bad to get a bad mark in a test?

Child: Of course.

Adult: Why?

Child: Because your mother beats you.

...

Adult: What about the things you study in there, what are they like?

Child: It's pencil and notebook ... The classroom is good, isn't it?

...

Adult: Why do you study?

Child: To have a better future. To have a better life.

...

Child: School is good because you can improve in your job. School teaches.

The children's text shows us in an expressive way the fundamental paradox of school experience nowadays. The proof that the school, throughout its existence, has become the very place where the child risks losing, perhaps forever, the possibility of having a dignified and true relationship with knowledge and its endless possibilities of transforming the individual and the culture. Both the teacher and the student face an everyday relation with knowledge and school activities which is totally technical and instrumental, devoid of meaning, but which fills the tremendous emptiness into which school has been transformed. In scenes such as these, which are repeated in classrooms throughout the country, what other options can intervene in and vivify the meeting between the teacher and the student? In which way can the relation with school knowledge be changed? The dialogues between children and adults show us that the teacher no longer talks about the place of knowledge, but of the place where it has become impossible to make this knowledge come true. There is mutual disbelief. While the child does not believe in great changes in school, the teacher, on his part, expresses low ex-

pectation in what regards the student. The consequences of this perverse pact are disastrous for the formation of the child.

Paradoxically, what stands out from the interviews we have made is that, although school today generates a feeling of uneasiness, it also cradles the promise of a better future. The school cannot be seen only as a place to be valued, or the opposite. In between these two extremes there is a series of nuances which say much about the school experience in a society split in the distribution of its cultural assets, thus making a positive school experience a privilege enjoyed by only a small portion of the population. The exclusion strategies are defined, on the one hand, by the political and economical organisation which sustains our social context in a broader, more hegemonic way. On the other hand, they are constantly up-dated in the interactions between people in the most distinct contexts. The school is one of the privileged institutions where we can exercise the experience of reproducing or subverting the established order.

### **Childhood and Contemporaneity: New Challenges**

Children no longer mingle with adults. They write their histories separately. In the past children were used to mingle with adults, and every gathering, whether for work or play, put children and adults together. However, nowadays, there is a growing tendency to separate the child's world from the adults', and this is one of the most radical consequences for modern childhood. The education of children, which used to happen in this natural environment of work and leisure, was substituted by schooling. Work required a more specialised knowledge, thereby starting a long process of 'confining' children, and adults also, which in our time goes from schooling up to more sophisticated and subtle ways of spatial confinement. Therefore, it is necessary to build the theoretical instruments that will allow us to think about the organisation of the time-space in which we live today, trying to explain the new forms of 'violence' engineered by electronic technology.

Within these questions is the issue of alterability, but from other parameters. Perhaps in the form of complicity, a whole generation that escapes the care of adults is no longer concerned about becoming adult, assuming the destiny of an endless and aimless adolescence. A generation that becomes self-sufficient, without caring about the other, eventually violent with the 'other', against the adult no longer seen as the antecedent (Baudrillard 1993). Yes, children no longer recognise themselves as the continuation of their

parents' history, they have become strangers in their own homes. 'Transformed by us, without piety or indignation, into merchandise of a time, the contemporary child's fate is to float eternally among adults who do not know what to do with the child anymore. As a consequence, children start to share with each other their most frequent experiences, which in most cases is limited to contact with the televised other, distant, virtual, mechanical (Jobim e Souza et al. 1997).

This distancing from the adult thrusts the child into a world of culture, mediated by identification with a virtual order. After all, who are the children and the adolescents of this new age, deprived of objective limits, but who float, however, in an electronic Eden, showing their intense and spontaneous affinity with the new technologies?

It is essential that this lack of dialogue be taken into consideration with respect to our acquisition of knowledge about childhood. If in modern times the child starts to be seen as an individual, gains a new status and is valued for his/her ability to build a dialogue, the absence of the adult interlocutor will condemn him/her to a monologue which will have as a consequence the creation of a 'childhood ghetto'. The rebuilding of this dialogue is the challenge proposed for the 'childhood experts'.

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