



What do pre-school children think about human ageing?

O que pensam as crianças da educação infantil acerca do envelhecimento humano?

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the conceptions of children between four and five years of age, regularly enrolled in Early Childhood Education, the first stage of Basic Education, about the elderly and human aging. In this sense, a bibliographic and field research was carried out. For data collection, Children's Literature books were used, which explored the theme in a playful and accessible way for the age of the students, so that it was possible to collect children's reports about their conceptions about human aging. Afterwards, the collected material was analyzed in the light of the bibliographic reference pertinent to the theme. According to what was analyzed, the results indicate that the theme of human aging is distant from the school environment and therefore appears in a superficial way within school contents, contributing to children presenting conceptions loaded with stereotypes about the elderly. It was also possible to observe that the children present different conceptions of the terms "elderly and old", which drew a lot of attention during data collection. The word "old" appeared in a pejorative way, while "elderly" children saw as people capable of performing activities. It is important to develop school curricula that work adequately with the theme of human aging from Early Childhood Education, as school is an intergenerational environment. Finally, it is through contact with the theme that the child may have different conceptions about the elderly and human aging.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Human aging, Research with children.

1 THE FIRST WORDS

This article is an excerpt from a research that aimed to investigate the conceptions of children in Early Childhood Education about the elderly person of human aging. It also sought to verify how the concepts of "aging" and "elderly" are conceived by four and five-year-old children from an Early Childhood Education institution and to relate the realities found with the bibliographic material. What is the child's view of human aging? Is it positive or negative about old age? These were questions that motivated the research. The initial hypothesis was that the view would be negative, since it is a subject that rarely appears in the first stage of Basic Education. Believing in the importance of this theme, working on the theme can contribute to children building healthier views of the elderly. The research carried out took place in two moments: the



bibliographic study and the field research. Initially, a survey was made on the theme and in the second moment, it was collected through the artistic languages "stories, songs and drawings" oral reports of children about the theme. The methodology of the research was bibliographic and field-based. With this article, it is expected to demonstrate the importance of the discussion on the theme of human aging from Early Childhood Education, since the school is an intergenerational space and it is in contact with the theme that children can have different views about the elderly and human aging.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 CONCEPTIONS OF CHILD, CHILDHOOD AND HUMAN AGING

There are several concepts about children and childhood. The conceptions of child and childhood that guide this article are based on the studies of Kramer (2003), Cambi (1999), Oliveira (2002), Ariès (2006), among others. In this article, a brief discussion of these conceptions will be presented.

Ideas related to the theme have undergone modifications due to historical and social processes over the centuries. It is important to think about all these advances, the most recent conceptions of child and childhood in contemporary society and the influence of the formal schooling process on the construction of these conceptions, in order to overcome common sense in relation to the inclusion of the theme of human aging in Early Childhood Education.

Based on Philippe Ariès, Kramer (2003) points out that:

Since Ariès published, in the 1970s, his study on the emergence of the notion of childhood in modern society, we have known that social views on childhood are socially and historically constructed: the concrete insertion of children and their roles vary with the forms of organization. (KRAMER, 2003, p.85).

For Kramer (2003), the definition of child is not simple, as age is associated with historical constructions, certain roles and specific knowledge. The author points out that in addition to the rise of the bourgeois class to power, culminating in the consolidation of capitalism, there were also, over the centuries, advances in relation to scientific knowledge, which triggered many social changes, contributing to the reduction of infant mortality. According to Kramer

[...] The idea of childhood arises in the historical and social context of modernity, with the reduction of infant mortality rates thanks to the advancement of science and economic and social changes. We know that the idea of childhood, as we know it today, was born within the middle classes that were formed within the bourgeoisie. (KRAMER, 2003, p.87).



This period of economic and social changes and scientific advances contributed to the change in the conception of child and childhood. The child came to be seen as a being with particularities, developing, with ways of acting and thinking different from those of the adult.

The studies of the historian Philippe Ariès (2006) report the transformations that occurred in relation to the conception of childhood from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. Ariès investigated how social groups thought about children and childhood from unusual records, such as: analysis of works of art, family diaries, churches, tombs and wills. According to Ariès, medieval society was unaware of childhood. Children were treated as "miniature adults." In this sense:

The feeling of childhood does not mean the same as affection for children: it corresponds to the awareness of the child's particularity, that particularity which essentially distinguishes the child from the adult, even when he is young. This awareness did not exist (Ariès, 2006, p.14).

And also:

Until around the twelfth century, medieval art was unaware of childhood or did not attempt to represent it. It is hard to believe that this absence was due to incompetence or lack of ability. It is more likely that there was no place for childhood in this world. An Eleventh-century Ottonian miniature gives us an impressive idea of the deformation that the artist imposed on children, in a sense that seems to us very distant from our feelings and our vision (ARIÈS, 2006, p. 17).

With the emergence of the notion of childhood, the child began to be prepared for the future through the process of formal schooling. According to Oliveira (2002), in the nineteenth century, the importance of education for social development was emphasized. In this way, the child became the center of the educational interest of adults and began to be seen as a subject of needs and an object of expectations and care. In this sense, Kramer (2003) states that:

A conception of the child that recognizes what is specific to childhood – its power of imagination, fantasy, creation – and understands children as citizens, people who produce culture and are produced in it, who have a critical eye that turns the order of things upside down, subverting that order. This way of seeing children can teach not only to understand them, but also to see the world from the point of view of childhood, it can help us learn from them. (KRAMER, 2003, p.91)

The concept of child and childhood has undergone modifications until reaching the twenty-first century. The feeling of childhood is educationally translated into moralization and pampering. Thus, in both cases, the child has no voice: either he is protected from everything or values and moralization must be inculcated in him, beyond his thoughts and desires (KRAMER, 2003).



Currently, there are new theories that address this theme, focusing on childhood and the child as an active subject. The research by Corsaro (2011), Demartini (2009), Quinteiro (2009), among others, is an advance in terms of the conception of child and childhood. In their studies, they analyze children from a collective perspective, thinking about the rich cultures of peers and children's productions and speeches. It is through collective production and participation that children become members of their own peer cultures.

In relation to human aging, in the aging process there is a misunderstanding about its process, as it is often understood that old age is something that is established all at once, forgetting that it happens every day. There are a multitude of factors that influence the human aging process. For many, aging is a phase of human life that has been immediately recognized only as an age concept, that is, based on chronological age and the physical characteristics it entails. However, Beauvoir (1976) considers that old age is not easily circumscribed due to the various perspectives that compose it. Regarding what old age is, Simone de Beauvoir says:

It is a biological phenomenon: the organism of the elderly man presents certain singularities. It has psychological consequences: certain behaviors, with good reason, are considered typical of old age. It has an existential dimension like all human situations: it modifies man's relationship in time, and therefore his relationship with the world and with his own history. On the other hand, man never lives in his natural state: his status is imposed on him both in old age and at all ages by the society to which he belongs. The complexity of the issue is due to the close interdependence of these views. (BEAUVOIR, 1976, p.13).

Beauvoir (1976) points out that no individual ages equally due to the physical, functional, psychological and social conditions that directly influence human aging, making old age a unique destiny for each individual. According to the author:

(...) Society determines the place and role of the elderly, taking into account their individual idiosyncrasies: their powerlessness, their experience; Conversely, the individual is conditioned by the practical and ideological attitude of society towards him. Thus, an analytical description of the various aspects of old age cannot suffice: each of them reacts on all the others and is affected by them. (BEAUVOIR, 1976, p.12)

Thinking about aging as a social process and old age as a socially constructed category, it is important to point out the positive aspects of old age and understand its process, in an attempt to demystify and reduce pejorative stereotypes about the elderly, since old age is a historical construction, as well as childhood, adolescence and youth. In this sense, Debert (1999) will say that:



Thus, a distinction is made between a universal and natural fact – the biological cycle, of the human being and of a good part of the natural species, which involves birth, growth and death – and a social and historical fact – the variability of the ways of conceiving and living human aging. (DEBERT, 1999, p.50)

Corroborating Debert's (1999) idea, old age can be experienced in several ways.

There are several variables that define the way an individual ages. Cordeiro (2003) contributes to our understanding of the social constructions of aging:

Old age, as a biological destiny, is experienced in a variable way, depending on the social context. The way in which the human aging process takes place, the physical, mental and social possibilities are not the same for everyone. The social class to which the individual belongs and which gives him a certain position at work, which gives him a vision of the world, which even determines his struggles, his desires and his habits is also decisive in the aging process. (CORDEIRO, 2003, p. 50)

For the author, when we refer to human aging, it is necessary to be clear that: "when dealing with human aging, we cannot think of a single model of old age..."(Cordeiro, 2007, p. 96). To face aging as a period of loss and decline is, according to Cordeiro, to turn to stereotyped and reductionist ideas. Especially because, with the significant increase in the elderly population in Brazil, many people are looking for activities to live with quality of life, this stage. As a result, issues related to aging have been gaining ground in Brazil for some decades.

3 PATHS TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH

The research presented in this article was divided into two moments: the bibliographic investigation, which constituted the first part, which was the survey on the specific theme, so that it was possible to clearly understand the concepts pertinent to the theme. In the second part, the field research, initially the institution was chosen and after the acceptance to participate in the research, the research was forwarded to the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sciences, UNESP. After a favorable opinion, the Free and Informed Consent Form was delivered, in which the objectives and procedures of the research were explained and finally data collection was performed.

For data collection, we opted for the oral reports of children, which, according to Queiroz, constitute the greatest human source of conservation and dissemination of knowledge. According to the author:

In all ages, human education (at the same time the formation of habits and the transmission of knowledge, both of which are very interconnected) has been based on narrative, which contains a first transposition: that of the unspeakable experience that is sought to be translated into words. (QUEIROZ, 1988, p. 16)



Demartini (2005) highlights the increasing importance of learning to listen to children and young people. For the author:

[...] We are not able to understand or, above all, we are not able to dialogue with children and young people – to what extent are we listening to their voices, often silent? I consider it necessary not only to get to know them as distinct social groups, with experiences and cultures different from those found among older groups, but, above all, to listen to them so that we can face together the serious problems that Brazilian society poses to us. (DEMARTINI, 2009, p. 2)

For data collection, participant observation and recording, such as research diaries and voice recorders, were also used. Three meetings were held with the children, lasting approximately fifty minutes. The meetings were previously scheduled with the teacher in charge of the classroom beforehand. During the meetings, the Story Time was used, with the reading of the books by Guilherme Augusto Araújo Fernandes, by Mem Fox and Remember Me, by Margaret Wild and Dee Huxley, with subsequent discussion related to the themes presented. Based on the stories, questions related to the theme were asked in a conversation circle, which were recorded through a voice recorder and later analyzed.

4 RESULTS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

The research sought to know the children's conceptions about the elderly and human aging. In this article, an excerpt of the research is presented, for which we will bring some discussions carried out with the children that drew a lot of attention. To guide the work, the first question asked to the children was: "who knows what an elderly person is?". The children expressed in the statements that conception related to aging and old age is associated with diseases, weakness and frailty. Their answers are always linked to the physical aspects of the elderly person and concomitantly to diseases. In the reports, it was possible to observe the stereotypes present in relation to aging. They are: "Sometimes grandma has to go to the hospital." "Being old is boring, because sometimes you can't do almost anything." "Sometimes it locks its back." "Can't drive." In the children's reports, it was possible to find differences between the words "old" and "elderly". The word "old" has a more negative meaning than the word "elderly" for children. As shown in the following statements: "An elderly person is someone who uses a cane and an old man does not know how to walk", "an elderly person has a cane and an old man does not". "Old people can't get things and old people can", 'old people are weak'. According to Cordeiro (2003), the word "old" is loaded with negative connotations and surrounded by stereotypes and prejudices in our society. Like so:



To the idea of old age, there are almost always undesirable and negative aspects, which present the elderly as someone always at a disadvantage in relation to the younger, even if circumstances and daily life show that things are not quite like that and that the qualities generally attributed to youth can be found in people of all ages. as well as the negative aspects attributed to old age, such as rigid postures in the face of the new, for example. (CORDEIRO, 2003, p. 46)

In the children's speeches, it was also possible to observe the issues related to human finitude, as they appeared strongly: "When people are old they die", "old people become stars", "each one dies when they get old". The main question that arises, when we analyze children's conceptions related to human aging, is to show them that old age also has its positive side, that it is possible to have healthy aging, that old age happens every day. This discussion is beneficial for children, who will grow up with a different look at the elderly, being able to understand that old age is not a period of life full of losses or bad situations, but a stage that can be lived with tranquility and quality of life.

To continue the collection of children's conceptions, the books chosen for the storytelling moments were Guilherme Augusto Araújo Fernandes, from *Men Fox and Remember me?*, from Margareth Wild, which deal precisely with these issues. In both stories, there is a relationship of affection and friendship between children and elderly people. There is the issue of memory loss and actions on the part of children to help older people recover their lost memories. From the stories told, the children were instigated with questions to ascertain their understanding of the plot, their postures and ways of thinking in relation to the elderly. The theme of memory was the main theme at the time of the conversation. The children raised interesting hypotheses about what memory is: "what stays inside our heads and makes us remember things", what makes us "remember last year", "is what we think and stays inside the brain". Through history and conversation, there was an attempt to deconstruct negative stereotypes in relation to human aging. The children found that not all elderly people lose their memory. Ways of thinking, beliefs about life and death, interpretations of history appeared in the dialogue. The children found that the elderly in the nursing home also like to play the piano, row, sing. However, the children remembered those who are bedridden, those who use canes, those who become very old and die.

In view of the conceptions presented by the children, the systematized knowledge of the school will contribute to reconstruct ideas about human aging. Setúbal (1996) points out that:

In this process of aging people, the school has a fundamental social importance, leading children to develop a new conception of aging, which values memory and exchanges, which are valuable between generations. (SETUBAL, 1996, p.)



Carvalho (2004) demonstrates that a preparation of society for the insertion of the elderly in their context and in their long-lived conditions, with good living conditions, presupposes new educational guidelines aimed at an age group that, according to statistics, has increased in recent years. Hence the need to analyze the official curriculum parameters that guide the elaboration of curricula and teaching plans, with regard to the phase of old age. For the author, the construction of knowledge, which can bring the school closer or further away from society, depends on the schooling process used.

And also:

Children construct concepts based on their experience with a given situation, at home or at school, that is, they learn what they experience in their interactions with the environment. The transformation of previous ideas or common sense is done, therefore, through the active participation of the student and the direction given by the teacher, who will elaborate the construction of those concepts, bringing them closer to specific knowledge (CARVALHO, 2004, p. 13).

In this sense, it is important that schools develop awareness work, preparing them for future care, making them sensitive to this issue and, more than that, preparing them for aging itself and for the issue of respect for diversity. This is recommended by the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (BRASIL, 2009).



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