

Research articles

Who is the difficult child? Cognitive schemas of kindergarten professionals

Quem é a criança difícil? Esquemas cognitivos de profissionais da pré-escola

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Abstract

Despite the inappropriateness of the term difficult child, many kindergarten professionals use it to refer to some of their children. This article seeks to explore the cognitive schemas associated with the category difficult child by 46 pre-kindergarten professionals, in an attempt to reveal the stereotypes associated with this category. Four main cognitive schemas were found, which associate difficult children with i) family characteristics; ii) the child's pathology; iii) the child's gender; iv) the child's behavior and development. Some professionals opposed the use of the term difficult child. The comparative analysis by territory vulnerability showed that professionals working in more vulnerable preschools used the cognitive schema associating difficult children with family characteristics more often, while those working in less vulnerable territories more commonly associated difficult children with behavioral and developmental issues.

Keywords: cognitive schemas; stereotypes; educational inequalities; kindergarten professionals.

Resumo

Apesar da inadequação do termo criança difícil, muitos profissionais da pré-escola o utilizam referindo-se a alguns de seus alunos. Este artigo busca explorar os esquemas cognitivos atrelados à categoria criança difícil de 46 profissionais de pré-escolas, buscando revelar os estereótipos associados a esta categoria. Foram encontrados quatro principais esquemas cognitivos, os quais associam crianças difíceis à i) características da família; ii) patologia da criança; iii) gênero da criança; iv) comportamento e desenvolvimento das crianças. Alguns profissionais se posicionaram contra o uso do termo criança difícil. A análise comparativa pela vulnerabilidade do território demonstrou que profissionais que trabalham em pré-escolas mais vulneráveis usaram mais o esquema cognitivo que associa crianças difíceis a características da família, enquanto que os que trabalham em territórios menos vulneráveis mais comumente associam crianças difíceis com questões de comportamento e desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: esquemas cognitivos; estereótipos; desigualdade educacional; profissionais da educação infantil.

INTRODUCTION

The term "difficult child" is considered an inadequate category according to Brazilian national pedagogical guidelines, as educators should not hold preconceived notions of what constitutes a "good" student or a socially constructed image of a "bad" student, since this may reinforce stereotypes that contribute to the exclusion of pupils (Brasil, 1999). The use of this category carries stereotypes about who is considered a difficult child, including assumptions about their families. Nevertheless, it is a term commonly used by education professionals. Analyzing how professionals perceive this category can help us understand processes of stereotyping and the reproduction of inequalities in the implementation of public policies.

Some Brazilian studies have examined how children considered difficult are treated by teachers (Dessandre, 2004; De Nadai; Vicentin; Bozza, 2015). Dessandre (2004) analyses how the category of the "difficult child" (and variations such as "school abnormalities" and

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“problem child”) has been used over time to classify children. This category (and its variations) has historically been associated with children perceived as having some form of organic abnormality or those whose family context is believed to lead to aggressive behavior and learning difficulties (Dessandre, 2004).

De Nadai, Vicentin, and Bozza (2015) examined how professionals in a school dealt with a conflict involving a second-year primary school pupil considered difficult by staff. The authors found that professionals tend to attribute the child’s misbehavior to the family and choose to apply expiatory sanctions, delegating the resolution of the conflict to the family.

Further research is needed on how the category of “difficult child” is used by education professionals and the effects this may have on children so labelled. This article seeks to address which cognitive schemas are activated by pre-school teachers when referring to a “difficult child” and how these vary according to the vulnerability of the territory. Cognitive schemas are relational structures that connect beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Lotta; Kirschbaum, 2021, 2022). Analyzing these schemas and variations in their use may contribute to understanding how certain children are stereotyped in pre-school settings, with potential implications for educational inequality.

The research presented here is based on interviews with pre-school professionals from four municipalities in the state of São Paulo. During the interviews, participants were asked which children they considered difficult to manage. Based on the analysis of their responses, four types of cognitive schemas related to the category of “difficult child” were identified, along with instances in which some professionals questioned the use of the term itself.

In addition to this introduction, the article is organized into six further sections. The second section discusses the theoretical framework on categorization processes, the use of stereotypes, and cognitive schemas by frontline public service professionals, such as teachers. The third section reviews studies on the use of stereotypes in education. The fourth section presents the research methods. The fifth section reports the findings, presenting and discussing each type of cognitive schema related to the “difficult child” and showing variations in their use according to the vulnerability of the pre-school territory. The sixth section analyses the findings considering the theoretical framework. Finally, the last section presents the concluding remarks.

CATEGORIZATION, STEREOTYPES AND COGNITIVE SCHEMAS

Categorization processes are an inherent part of human social interactions. Categorization is a relational, social, and cognitive process through which individuals classify others into social, political, or administrative categories. Individuals classified within the same category are perceived as sharing one or more common characteristics (Harrits; Møller, 2011; Møller, 2009).

Frontline workers—such as teachers, social workers, physicians, and police officers—categorize the citizens with whom they interact in their daily work. These professionals are responsible for dealing with real and complex cases and, through their discretionary power, simplifying such cases by allocating them into political or administrative categories and determining which individuals are entitled to benefits or subject to sanctions (Lipsky, 2019; Lotta; Costa, 2020; Lotta, 2015; Møller, 2009). Therefore, categorization can be understood as an everyday practice that determines who receives what (Møller, 2009).

Laws, guidelines, and eligibility criteria support professionals’ decision-making by establishing political and administrative categories. However, such regulations may be broad or ambiguous, leaving room for professionals to exercise discretion in deciding how to act in relation to each individual (Lotta; Santiago, 2017; Møller, 2009). In this process, frontline workers may also mobilize social categories (Harrits; Møller, 2011). Social categories are informal and are disseminated through social processes.

Category systems across different domains (political, administrative, and social) are not isolated from one another; rather, they influence each other. Social categories may serve as a basis for the construction of political categories. Conversely, political categories may influence the persistence or transformation of social categories (Harrits; Møller, 2011).

Social categories may also serve as a basis for the mobilization of stereotypes. In psychological literature, stereotypes are defined as internalized cognitive schemas that encompass the associations and beliefs we hold about members of a group (Dovidio et al., 2010; Hilton; von Hippel, 1996). Cognitive schemas consist of sets of elements and patterns of associations. They are relational structures that connect beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Based on these schemas, individuals make relational inferences (Lotta; Kirschbaum, 2021, 2022). For instance, if a cognitive schema associates A with B but not with C, an individual is likely to assume that B is present when observing A, while also inferring that C is not present.

When an individual judges another based on an internalized cognitive schema related to a social category, they attribute a set of characteristics to those belonging to that category. This set is sustained by a network of beliefs about why these attributes are interconnected (Hilton; von Hippel, 1996).

THE USE OF STEREOTYPES BY EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

The use of stereotypes by education professionals may constitute an additional factor in the reproduction of educational inequality. When a child is associated with a negatively valued social category, this may lead to worse treatment. In an educational system such as Brazil's, where educational equity is established as a central objective (Brasil, 2016, 2017, 2018), the application of stereotypes may represent a significant barrier.

Studies show that teachers hold different expectations and attitudes towards children from different social groups, which may result in long-term negative effects on academic performance, particularly for students belonging to groups associated with negative stereotypes (Hinnant; O'Brien; Ghazarian, 2009; Millet; Croizet, 2016). Brazilian research has already demonstrated that some teachers treat and assess black, low-income, and male students less favorably.

For instance, teachers tend to offer fewer compliments and assign lower grades to black students compared to white students with equivalent performance in national standardized assessments (Carvalho; Guizzo, 2016; Cavalleiro, 2000; Oliveira; Abramowicz, 2010). Stereotypes about poor and socially vulnerable families are also commonly mobilized by teachers, who tend to associate such families with drug use, disorganization, and lack of support (Lotta; Kirschbaum, 2022; Patto, 2015; Thomazinho, 2017). Patto (2015) investigated how low-income students were stereotyped by education professionals in the 1990s. The stereotype surrounding these students was supported by a network of beliefs: that these children did not value schooling, lived without rules, behaved poorly, and were likely to fail academically.

A potential factor in the reproduction of educational inequality lies in teaching practices guided by processes of stereotypical categorization of students. Such treatment may be unequal and detrimental to children who are perceived through the lens of negative stereotypes. The literature has explored mechanisms through which stereotypes reproduce inequality. One such mechanism is the self-fulfilling prophecy. Stereotyping generates heterogeneous expectations among teachers regarding their students, producing a cycle described by Lautier (2011). The self-fulfilling prophecy follows this sequence: teachers construct simplified representations of their students based on their social background. From these representations, they develop differentiated expectations regarding behavior and academic performance. These expectations, in turn, shape the ways in which teachers interact with each student. Finally, a feedback effect may occur, whereby students respond to teachers' behavior by adjusting to these expectations (Lautier, 2011).

Some Brazilian researchers have focused specifically on the use of stereotypes by early childhood education teachers. Cavalleiro (2000) examined how racism is reflected in teachers' attitudes, identifying instances of differentiated treatment between white and black children. The author observed situations in which black children were negatively stereotyped by teachers, while white children were categorized through positive stereotypes. For example, teachers were heard referring to black children as "he's a troublemaker," "a naughty boy,"

or “the most aggressive,” whereas white children received more praise for their individual qualities, such as “you are clever,” and were treated more affectionately, receiving more hugs and kisses.

Similarly, Oliveira and Abramowicz (2010) analyzed how racial stereotypes influence early childhood teachers’ treatment of their students. They found that while teachers tended to “dote on” some white children, black children did not receive the same type of attention. These affectionate behaviors included holding children, praising them, and offering physical affection such as hugs and kisses. Conversely, the authors observed that teachers avoided physical contact with black children and stereotyped some black boys as mischievous.

Finco (2010) examined how gender stereotypes permeate the practices of early childhood teachers in an educational unit in São Paulo. The study identified a range of stereotypes regarding what teachers perceive as typical characteristics of boys and girls. Boys are seen as disobedient, aggressive, and restless, whereas girls are viewed as obedient, organized, and responsible. At times, children were separated by gender and received differentiated treatment—for example, girls were allowed to enter the classroom first and use the bathroom earlier. Finco also observed that teachers hold normative expectations about the types of games boys and girls should prefer, expectations associated with gender stereotypes: girls are expected to enjoy playing with dolls and wearing dresses. Boys who engage in such activities are perceived as transgressive, and teachers expressed concerns about the sexual orientation of these boys.

METHOD

This article explores the cognitive schemas expressed by 46 pre-school professionals when referring to “difficult children”. The category of “difficult children” may be understood as a “folk term”, that is, a term used by members of a microculture to label specific social categories (McCurdy; Spradley; Shandy, 2004). Although national guidelines explicitly state that professionals should not assume the existence of an ideal type of student (Brasil, 1999), during a pilot field study conducted in May and June 2022 in two pre-schools across two municipalities in the state of São Paulo¹, the researcher observed several professionals categorizing children as either “easy” or “difficult”.

The data used in this study derive from qualitative research conducted through a multiple case study in eight pre-schools, combined with data analysis. Fieldwork was carried out between October and December 2022. Unlike most quantitative research, which relies on *probabilistic* sampling, qualitative sampling should be guided by *purposive* sampling (Maxwell, 2014).

Diversification criteria were adopted in the selection of municipalities, pre-schools, and participating professionals. Four municipalities were selected with varying levels of resources (measured by municipal Gross Domestic Product – GDP) and inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient). In each municipality, the local Department of Education indicated two pre-schools for fieldwork—one located in a high-vulnerability area and another in a low-vulnerability area. The selection of professionals sought to ensure some degree of variation among participants. Table 1 summarizes key characteristics of the 46 interviewees by pre-school. In each pre-school, four teachers and two teaching assistants were included in the study. In one of the pre-schools, however, there were no assistants; therefore, only four teachers participated.

The study employed multiple data collection methods, including document analysis, observation, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative vignettes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and teaching assistants, with an average duration of 50 minutes. The interview guide included a question asking which children respondents considered the most difficult to deal with (see Appendix 1). In this article, only the responses to this question are analyzed.

The NVivo data analysis software was used to transcribe and code the interviews. Qualitative data analysis is characterized by an ongoing process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles; Huberman, 1994). Following an inductive

¹ The aforementioned fieldwork was conducted with the aim of testing the data collection instruments (observation protocol, semi-structured interview guide, and qualitative vignettes).

Table 1. Total number of interviewees by pre-school and personal attributes.

	Total	p-sch1	p-sch2	p-sch3	p-sch4	p-sch5	p-sch6	p-sch7	p-sch8
Total number of interviewees	46	6	4	6	6	6	6	6	6
Professional role									
Teacher	32	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Assistant	14	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2
Gender									
Female	43	6	4	6	5	6	5	6	5
Male	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
Average age	43.1	47.3	54.5	37.2	32.7	43	39.3	42.2	48.5
Race									
Black	11	1	0	0	2	0	1	2	5
White	30	3	4	6	3	6	4	3	1
Asian	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Not declared	4	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
University degree									
Degree in Pedagogy	34	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	5
Incomplete degree in Pedagogy	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Other completed university degree	6	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	0
Other incomplete university degree	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
None	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
Type of contract									
Civil service (tenured position)	39	5	4	5	3	5	6	5	6
Temporary	7	1	0	1	3	1	0	1	0
Average years of experience	14.2	12.8	32.5	9.75	4.6	7.17	11.8	14.3	20.5
At this pre-school	4.5	3.33	4	2.2	2.33	0	3.6	4.33	16.3

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Chart 1. Types of Cognitive Schemas on “Difficult Children”.

Type of cognitive schema	Description
i. Family characteristics (18 professionals)	Cognitive schemas linking “difficult children” to social group or family behavior.
ii. Child pathology (13 professionals)	Cognitive schemas linking “difficult children” to child pathology, referring to children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
iii. Child’s gender (1 professional)	Cognitive schemas linking “difficult children” to the child’s gender, associating male gender with indiscipline.
iv. Child behavior and development (11 professionals)	Cognitive schemas linking “difficult children” to behavioral or developmental challenges based on pedagogical concerns.
v. Non-existence of “difficult children” (2 professionals)	Professionals who state that there are no “difficult children”.

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

coding² of responses to the question “Which children are the most difficult to work with in the classroom? Why?”, five criteria used by respondents to describe difficult children were identified. Three criteria relate to children’s characteristics: behavior and development, pathology, and gender. In addition, one criterion relates to family characteristics. As cognitive schemas are relational structures, the analysis examined how professionals connected these criteria to one another. This approach supports the analysis of the normative assumptions they make about difficult children. Visual representations were developed to illustrate the cognitive schemas regarding difficult children identified among respondents. Four main types of cognitive schemas were identified, in addition to instances where the category itself was questioned. These types of cognitive schemas are presented in Chart 1.

RESULTS

Cognitive schemas on “difficult children”

In this section, each type of cognitive schema identified in the analysis and presented in Table 1 is discussed. Each schema is illustrated with an example of a professional using that type of cognitive schema, through a figure that displays the relational assumptions made by the professional in the form of a coding tree derived from their statement. Below each figure, the quotation that generated the coding tree is provided.

i. Family characteristics

The most common cognitive schema identified in the interviews with professionals was the one linking “difficult” children to family characteristics, illustrated by the example of professional 34 in Figure 1. Eighteen professionals indicated that “difficult” children were those whose families exhibited certain characteristics perceived as negative. These characteristics were associated with family behavior—such as lack of support, lack of collaboration, or permissiveness—and with the family’s social group, including family structure or association with a social problem. Within this type of cognitive schema, it is possible to observe that professionals activate the social identification of children and their families and relate it to the category of “difficult children.”

ii. Child pathology

Another type of cognitive schema regarding “difficult” children focuses on children’s pathology. Thirteen professionals mentioned “inclusion children”, children with special educational needs,

² The development of inductive categories does not mean that categories emerge automatically from the data. Rather, it requires the researcher’s active involvement and the activation of prior knowledge (Kuckartz e Rädiker, 2023).

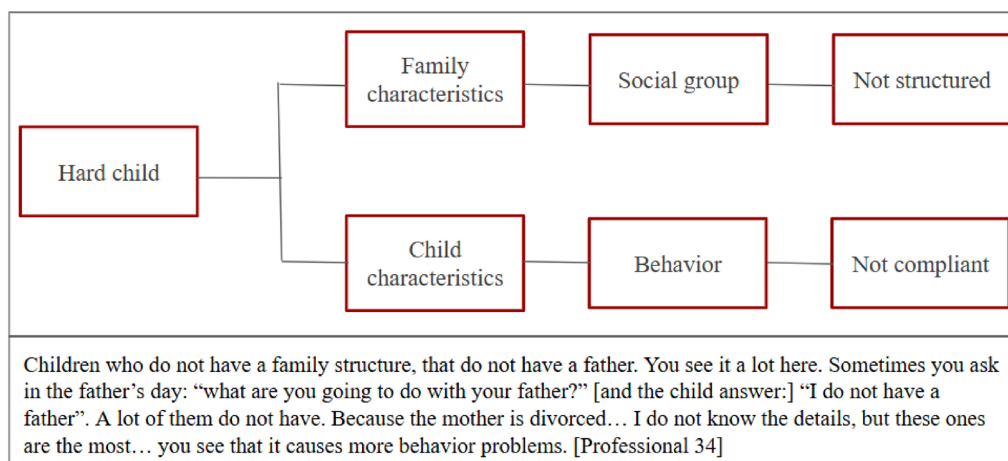


Figure 1. Coding tree representing professional 34's cognitive schema: "difficult child/family characteristics".
Source: Author's own elaboration.

or children with disabilities when asked which children were the most difficult to deal with. "Inclusion children" was another folk term identified during the fieldwork. On several occasions, professionals used this term to refer to children with some form of disability. This term likely emerged during the process of implementing policies aimed at including children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings over the past two decades.

The National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education was introduced in 2008 (Brasil, 2008). Since then, students with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness have been required to enroll in regular schools, with the aim of ensuring that all children have the right to attend school together, rather than being segregated into special schools or classrooms (as was previously the case). In practice, children with disabilities began attending regular classrooms and receiving specialized support services outside regular school hours (Bezerra, 2017). As a result of this policy, since 2011 the majority of students with disabilities have been enrolled in regular schools (Bruno; Nozu, 2019). Some of the interviewed professionals (eight participants) linked these children to behavioral challenges, such as aggressiveness or difficulties with self-control—as illustrated by professional 04 (Figure 2). In these cases, it can be argued that these professionals are activating stereotypes about children with disabilities.

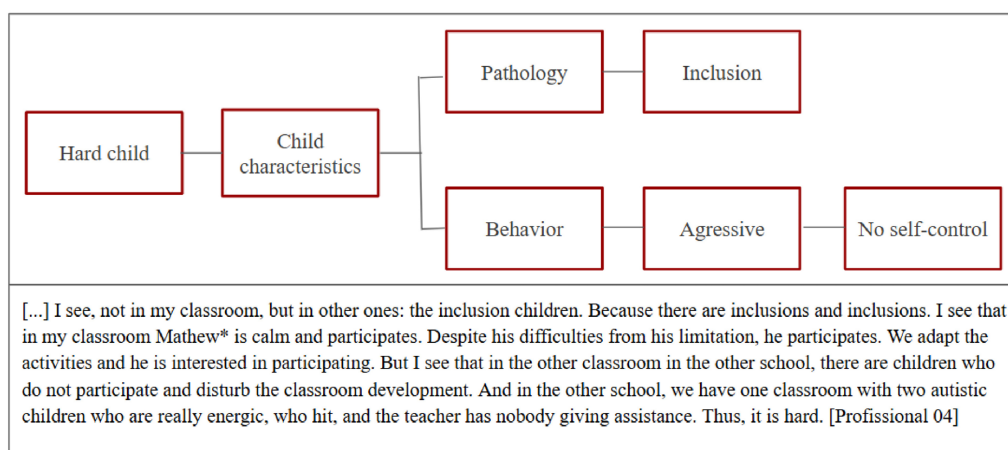


Figure 2. Coding tree representing teacher 4's cognitive schema: "difficult child/pathology". *fictitious name.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Five other professionals who indicated that the most difficult children to deal with were those with some form of disability did not associate them with behavioral problems. Instead,

these professionals argued that such children were more difficult to work with because the education system, the pre-school, or even they themselves were not adequately prepared to meet the distinct demands these children present. For example, professional 28 explained her concerns about working with children with autism: “But I think it’s a fear I have because I’m not a specialist [...] inclusion is something you really have to think carefully about, because not all schools are equipped to carry out this kind of inclusive work.” It was possible to identify that professionals feel a lack of knowledge regarding how to support the development of these children. In a similar vein, professional 38 stated:

“Children with special needs are also difficult for me because I often don’t know what to do. I don’t know whether I should set too many limits or too few. As it is something new, I try many different approaches—I think every day is a new attempt, something new for me to explore and try. Some things work very well, and I keep repeating what I know works.” [Teacher 38]

The lack of collaboration was another issue highlighted by teacher 43, who complained about the lack of support from colleagues and school management:

“But I’ve had a student with special needs and never received help from anyone. It’s like, ‘the student is yours, okay?’ In the end, they don’t belong to the school, they become your responsibility. If they are disruptive or crying all day, it’s ‘oh, teacher, how difficult, isn’t it?’, but no one actually comes to help you, because the others are in their own classrooms.” [Teacher 43]

iii. Children's gender

Only one teaching assistant stated that boys were the most difficult children (Figure 3), arguing that they are less obedient than girls. Although only one professional explicitly associated “difficult children” with “boys”, observations and informal conversations revealed an underlying belief among some professionals that boys and girls exhibit different behaviors and should be treated accordingly. In some pre-schools, elements within the environment reflected gender stereotypes, such as a ballerina or a heart representing girls, and a boy dressed in blue or a square representing boys.

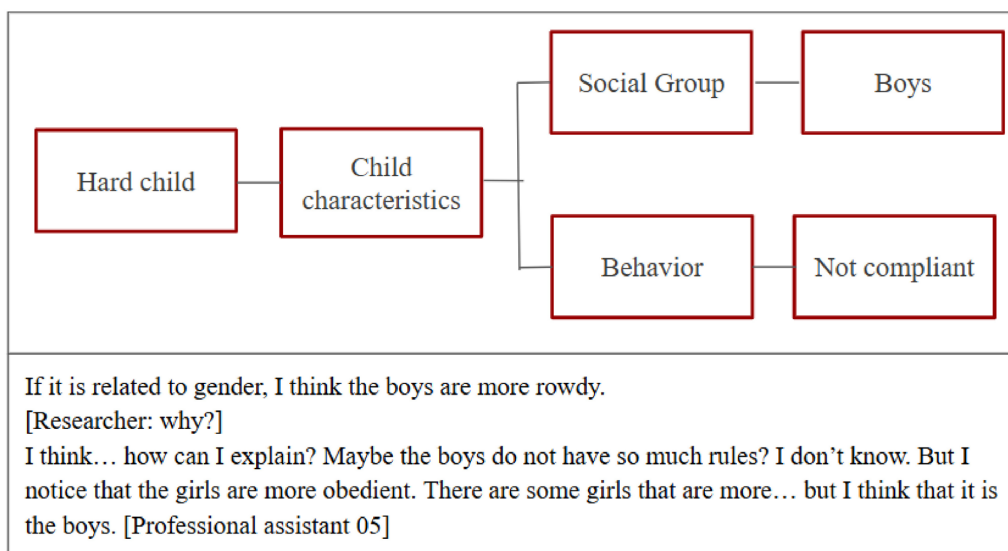


Figure 3. Coding tree representing professional assistant 5's cognitive schema: “difficult child/gender”.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

iv. Child behavior and development

Eleven professionals described difficult children as those who exhibit challenging behavior or low levels of development. The behaviors described as challenging varied: being very quiet or

overly energetic, lacking self-control, being disobedient, or displaying aggressiveness. Figure 4 provides an example of teacher 35's cognitive schema regarding difficult children.

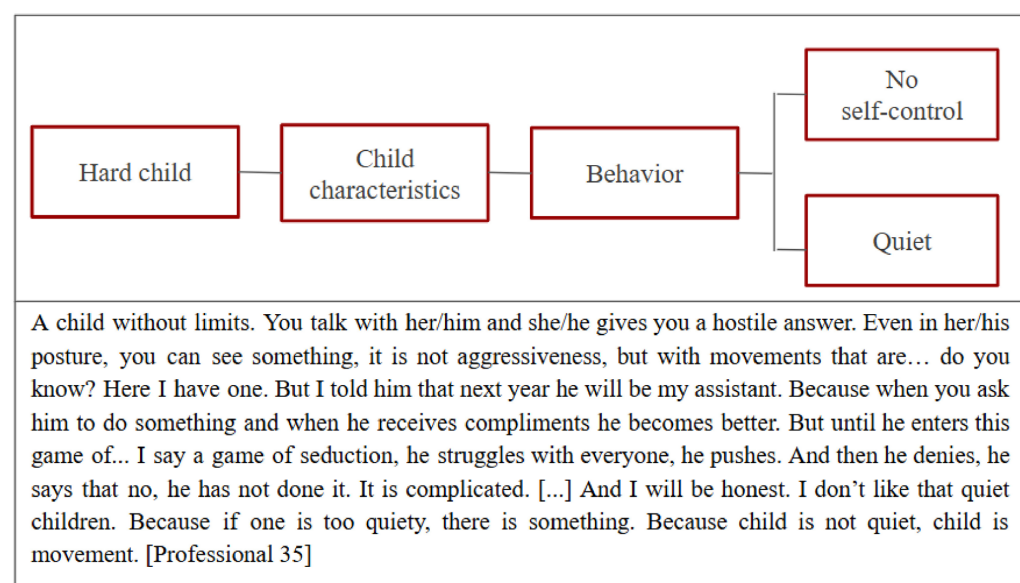


Figure 4. Coding tree representing teacher 35's cognitive schema: “difficult child/behavioral and developmental difficulties”.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

The challenge in this case lies in the fact that children’s development and behavior deviate from the pedagogical objectives of pre-school teachers, namely to educate children to cooperate, respect rules, and communicate in order to resolve conflicts peacefully. Thus, this cognitive schema can be understood as one that reflects pedagogical concerns about child development.

v. Non-existence of the “difficult child”

Three teachers argued that there are no “difficult children.” However, they acknowledged that this is a commonly used term among pre-school professionals to describe certain children. As teacher 21 noted: “Unfortunately, I notice that within the school community—not only teachers, but also families, cleaning staff, kitchen staff, and everyone in the school community—we hear [this term ‘difficult children’].”

These three teachers argued that challenging situations do not arise from the characteristics of particular children, but rather from the adult’s perspective or from conditions within the school system—such as the high number of children assigned to each professional.

After teacher 44 told the interviewer that she does not believe “difficult children” exist, she was asked about the differences among pre-school professionals regarding the use of this popular term. She responded: “Some teachers say, ‘this child is difficult,’ full stop. Others think, ‘no, I’m going to try to understand a little what is happening here’ [...] I think we need to be a bit more open to understanding what is different.” [Teacher 44]

Teacher 44 described two contrasting situations in her account. One involves professionals who label and distance themselves from “difficult” children and, as a result, fail to understand them. The other involves professionals who are more open to observing and investigating each child’s situation. This reflects variation in how professionals categorize children and mobilize stereotypes. While some activate negative stereotypes about children, others may be able to inhibit such stereotypes and engage with children in a more reflective and investigative manner (Thomazinho, 2024).

Variations by territorial vulnerability

In Figure 5, the graphs display the distribution of the use of each type of cognitive schema among professionals, according to the level of territorial vulnerability of the pre-school in

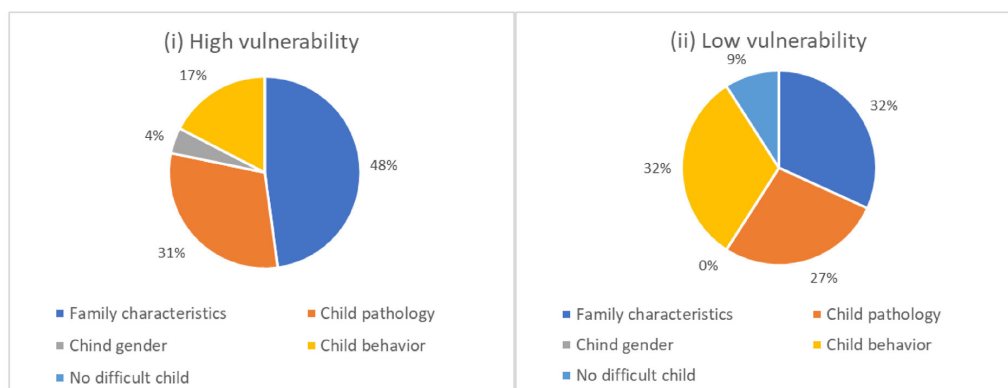


Figure 5. Distribution of cognitive schema types used by professionals according to the vulnerability of the pre-school territory.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

which they worked. Graph (i) considers professionals working in high-vulnerability pre-schools, while graph (ii) refers to those working in low-vulnerability areas.

The first notable finding is that in high-vulnerability pre-schools, the cognitive schema that associates the category of “difficult child” with family characteristics is used more frequently (48% of professionals working in high-vulnerability areas employed this schema). This suggests that negative stereotypes about families are more frequently directed towards those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

By contrast, in low-vulnerability pre-schools, a higher proportion of professionals used the cognitive schema that associates “difficult children” with behavioral issues (32%) or questioned the use of the term itself (9%). In other words, in these contexts, difficult children are more commonly viewed from the perspective that behavioral challenges are part of child development and fall within the pedagogical scope of the educator. Unlike associations with family characteristics, this perspective allows for interventions to be carried out within the school and classroom environment.

DISCUSSION

The types of cognitive schemas identified in this study are associated with theories of school failure and with common stereotypes about children and their families, particularly those from more vulnerable populations.

In the school context, meritocratic ideology underpins some professionals’ beliefs regarding the reasons why certain children exhibit behavioral or learning difficulties. This ideology supports the attribution of blame and the stereotyping of families, particularly those who are poor or perceived as “dysfunctional” (Patto, 2015; Thomazinho, 2017). Therefore, the cognitive schema that associates difficult children with family characteristics is closely linked to meritocratic ideology.

The findings on variations by territorial vulnerability indicate that this type of cognitive schema is more common in vulnerable areas, corroborating previous research showing that poorer families are more frequently blamed for their children’s academic failure (Patto, 2015). As discussed by Lotta and Kirschbaum (2022), when more vulnerable families are held responsible for children’s misbehavior, professionals tend to refer cases to services outside the school. In other words, teachers do not perceive the issue as something that can be addressed using the school’s own resources.

Regarding the “difficult child/pathology” cognitive schema, it is at times associated with widely disseminated negative stereotypes about people with disabilities—namely, that they are unfriendly, less competent, or incapable of living in society (Andrade, 2022; Rohmer; Louvet, 2018). For example, Andrade (2022) found that among pedagogy students, negative stereotypes about people with disabilities are common, such as perceiving them as antisocial, incapable, or aggressive. Bezerra (2017) discusses how mainstream teachers, after becoming

aware of a child's diagnosis, may label these children as incapable of learning. In this way, the diagnosis has a negative effect on teachers' judgements of the child. Indeed, in this study, some professionals were found to hold low expectations regarding children with disabilities and expressed fear of working with them.

As noted earlier, some of the respondents who presented the "difficult child/pathology" cognitive schema did not mobilize stereotypes about these children, but instead pointed to the lack of resources within the school system to effectively include them. This issue has also been identified by other researchers. For example, Bruno and Nozu discuss inclusive education policies in Brazilian early childhood institutions and highlight several challenges: "the lack of qualified teachers in Early Childhood and Special Education, the precarious conditions of schools, the inadequacy of teaching materials and pedagogical resources, and, above all, teachers' lack of knowledge regarding the specific needs of these children" (Bruno; Nozu, 2019, p. 696). These findings point to the need for greater training so that all early childhood education professionals are adequately prepared to support all children.

These two ways of understanding the challenges of working with children with disabilities were also identified by Andrade (2022) in her study on pedagogy students' perceptions of people with autism. She found that while some students reported that it is difficult to work with them based on stereotypes suggesting that intrinsic characteristics of individuals with autism create difficulties for teachers, another (smaller) group of students argued that it is the lack of teacher training that makes it more difficult to work with individuals with autism.

The "difficult child/child's gender" cognitive schema was identified in the account of one interviewed professional. This schema is associated with a common gender stereotype widely discussed in the literature: boys are perceived as undisciplined, whereas girls are viewed as more disciplined and responsible (Bíscaro, 2009; Finco, 2010).

The fourth type of cognitive schema identified in this article is the one that links the category of "difficult children" to those who display challenging behavior or low levels of development. This schema is not associated with stereotypes about a social group, but rather with pedagogical objectives related to child development. Gilliam and Gulløv (2017) discuss how early childhood education institutions aim to socialize children into socially acceptable and non-offensive behaviors. Therefore, educating children on how to relate appropriately to others constitutes a significant part of pedagogical work. This does not imply that the behaviors valued by educators are inherently superior or represent a universal standard; rather, they are shaped by the profession, the historical context, and existing power relations (Lareau, 2011).

It is noteworthy that this cognitive schema was used more frequently by professionals working in low-vulnerability pre-schools. This suggests that children in these contexts are less often viewed through stereotypical lenses. Moreover, by framing the issue as pedagogical, it opens the possibility that educational practices themselves can address and resolve these challenges.

Before proceeding to the next section, it is necessary to briefly address the absence of cognitive schemas related to "difficult children" in terms of race. Racist practices in pre-schools have already been documented by other researchers (Cavalleiro, 2000). However, as Santos et al. (2006) argue, it is no longer socially desirable to be perceived as racist. As a result, when responding to research, individuals tend to avoid explicitly racist statements (Santos et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

This article examined the cognitive schemas that pre-school professionals hold regarding the term "difficult children" and how the use of these schemas varies according to the vulnerability of the school's territory. The study was based on interviews with 46 pre-school professionals (32 teachers and 14 assistants) and on how they characterize "difficult children."

The findings reveal that the cognitive schemas most frequently used by the interviewed professionals were those that associate "difficult children" either with family characteristics or with some form of pathology. In the first case, there is a tendency to blame families for children's behavioral problems, thereby externalizing the issue beyond the scope of the school. Negative stereotypes about families are activated, for example, portraying them

as dysfunctional or as failing to collaborate with the school. In the second case, there is a stereotyping of children with disabilities, who are perceived as exhibiting difficult behaviors, such as aggressiveness. The use of this cognitive schema also highlights the lack of professional training and the insufficient preparedness of pre-schools as a whole to effectively deliver inclusive education.

When comparing the distribution of the use of cognitive schemas regarding “difficult children” by territorial vulnerability, it becomes evident that negative stereotypes about families are more frequently activated in more vulnerable areas. This reveals the persistence of blaming poorer families for their children’s educational failure.

By contrast, in low-vulnerability areas, it was more common to observe the use of the cognitive schema that relates “difficult children” to behavioral or developmental issues, as well as the questioning of the term itself. In both cases, professionals’ concerns are more closely aligned with professional knowledge. Associating difficult children with behavioral or developmental challenges is linked to the pedagogical objective of educating children to cooperate and resolve conflicts peacefully. Similarly, questioning the term is grounded in pedagogical guidelines, which consider it inappropriate to assume the existence of an ideal type of child.

This article contributes to research on the use of stereotypes in education by revealing that stereotypes related to families, pathology, and gender remain persistent. Furthermore, it highlights mechanisms through which educational inequality is reproduced, showing that children considered “difficult” in high-vulnerability pre-schools are more likely to be associated with family-related problems, whereas those in low-vulnerability pre-schools are more commonly viewed through a pedagogical lens.

There are several practical implications arising from the findings of this study. First, it is essential to include, in both initial and continuing teacher education, discussions on widely held stereotypes, such as those related to families and their social class, to pathology, and to children’s gender. Racial equity is also central to this discussion. As argued by Hilton and von Hippel (1996), reducing the use of stereotypes requires actively discussing them and critically examining the beliefs that sustain them.

Second, it is necessary to engage professionals in reflecting on how developmental challenges in children from less vulnerable backgrounds tend to be interpreted through a pedagogical lens, whereas challenges faced by more vulnerable children are often associated with stereotypes and consequently addressed through external referrals. Finally, attention should be given to the need to better prepare schools and their professionals to effectively include children with disabilities.

In closing, several directions for future research are suggested. Even within the group of pre-schools with the same level of vulnerability, variations were observed in the types of cognitive schemas used by the interviewed professionals. It is therefore necessary to better understand the factors that influence this variation. For instance, do professionals’ training, gender, race, or social class shape the types of cognitive schemas they hold about “difficult children” and the stereotypes they employ?

Additionally, it is important to investigate whether characteristics of each pre-school may play a role—for example, the guidelines of the School Pedagogical Project, the degree of collaboration among staff, and the availability of resources and training for inclusive education. Answering these questions is essential if we aim to reduce the use of stereotypes among education professionals and ensure equitable education for all.

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Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide.

[Introduction, reading and signing of the informed consent form]

Introductory questions

1. First, could you tell me a bit about yourself?

1.1 Educational background, experience in early childhood education, other professional experiences, age, race/ethnicity?

1.2 What is your educational background? (Probe: Do you hold a university degree? In which field and from which institution? Was it completed in person or online?)

Role in the pre-school

2. Could you tell me a bit about your work in this school?

(Probe: What is your type of employment contract?)

3. What do you like most and least about your work in the pre-school?

(Probe: Why? Can you give me an example?)

Daily tasks

4. Could you describe a typical working day?

(Probe: start of the day, contact with parents, indoor and outdoor activities, meals, and pedagogical activities)

Eliciting a narrative

5. Could you describe a challenging situation experienced by you and your colleagues with a child during this year?

Questions:

5.1 What was the challenge? Why?

5.2 What do you think caused it?

5.3 What did you do to address this situation?

5.4 Thinking back to the beginning of the year, could you describe your first impressions when you met this child?

5.5 Did you observe any changes in the child over the course of the year?

5.6 How do you think their transition to the first year of primary school will be?

Relationship with the children

6. Could you describe the main characteristics of the children in your class(es) in general?

7. And regarding this community and the children's families, could you describe them?

(Probe: What kind of interaction do you have with the families?)

8. Which children are the most difficult to work with in the classroom? Why? And which are the easiest? Why?

(Probe: What is the difference between them?)

9. What do you do to integrate the children into your class?

(Probe: What do you do when a child does not interact well with others?)

10. Is this something on which you and your colleagues might disagree? Why?

Vignettes

11. Vignettes are introduced one at a time (presented for the interviewee to read) (see Appendix: Vignettes VF).

Follow-up questions:

11.1 Do you recognize this situation in your daily work?

11.2. What do you think explains the boy's behavior?

11.3. What would you do if you were in her position?

11.4. How would you support your colleague?

11.5. 5. Do you think he should remain in the group? Why?

11.6. What are the main differences/similarities between the boys in the two stories?

(Probe: Why? Which elements of the story lead you to perceive this difference?)

Personal background and values

12. Could you describe your childhood and where you grew up?

(Probe: Did you attend early childhood education? Did you enjoy it?)

13. In your opinion, what is important in raising a child?

14. Is there currently any type of person with whom you would prefer not to interact?

15. What do you believe is the main social or political issue today?

Questions on educational policies and theoretical frameworks

16. Do you consider national early childhood education policies and pedagogical frameworks to be relevant to your work? Why?

(Probe: questions about the pre-school's Pedagogical Project)

17. How do you assess the municipal policies for early childhood education in this system?

(Probe: points of agreement and disagreement)

18. Do you see yourself as a public servant? Why or why not?

Purpose of pre-school

19. What do you believe is the social purpose of pre-school?

20. If you could change education policy, what would you change?

Other: Is there anything you would like to add that was not addressed during the interview?