

International  
Journal of  
**Human  
Sciences  
Research**

**POVERTY AND SOCIAL  
INEQUALITY: WHAT  
CHILDREN THINK**

---

*Sônia Bessa*

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9857-6523>

*Dayse de Souza Costa*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8083-8716>

All content in this magazine is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License. Attribution-Non-Commercial-Non-Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



**Abstract:** With the objective of analyzing and identifying the representations of poverty and socioeconomic inequality, this article presents the results of an investigation with children from the 4th and 5th years of elementary school in a municipality of Goiás. 101 children participated. Individual interviews were used and the levels proposed by Denegri et al (1998) were used to analyze the results, which indicate the participants' economic thinking. Students associated wealth with happiness, well-being and health. Only 5% of students have a more elaborate understanding of poverty and social inequality. 95% have an intuitive understanding, the poor are seen as sad, unhappy, failed and the rich are happy, fulfilled, beautiful and successful. Social mobility is seen as a meritocracy, those who work and make a lot of effort will get rich, they do not establish a relationship between power and exploitation. No relevant differences were found regarding gender, age or school year attended.

**Keywords:** Inequality, poverty, students, early years.

## INTRODUCTION

Unfavorable economic situations and poverty are timeless and affect all countries. For Bessa (2020), poverty, social inequality and lack of perspective are phenomena that have always permeated humanity, are visible and disturbing in the context of modernity, forcing people to live exposed to all kinds of marginality and inequality. Social inequality is strongly related to poverty and are complex phenomena that strongly compromise economic, cultural, political and social development and affect millions of people worldwide. Poverty can be expressed at several levels: income, culture, education, ethnicity, gender, in addition to the lack of resources that must be basic and promote citizenship and dignity to human life.

The Oxfam Brazil report (2022) reports that the wealth of the ten richest men in the world has doubled since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The wealth of the 10 richest men in the world is greater than that of the poorest 3.1 billion people. Growing economic, gender and racial inequalities, as well as inequalities, do not happen by chance, but by choice. Structural policy choices are made for the richest and most powerful people, causing direct harm to people in poverty. Inequality takes the lives of thousands daily. "Inequality contributes to the death of at least one person every four seconds in the world" (OXFAM Brasil 2022, p. 3)

For Gaiger (2009) inequalities and poverty are associated phenomena so that the effective reduction of poverty levels requires policies and programs to combat inequalities. Inequality is markedly what distinguishes Brazilian society the most, even poverty. For Ribeiro and Menezes (2008) poverty is a determinant in the structure of Brazilian inequality, both in income distribution and in opportunities for economic and social inclusion. What generates poverty in Brazil is not the lack of resources, but the poor distribution of existing resources.

Bessa (2020) refers to the lack of an inclusive economic policy, and that reducing inequality levels walks in slow steps. The Brazilian economy works in a concentrated way, many have little and few have much. If economic goods are not properly distributed, so that everyone benefits, the fight against poverty will become slower and slower.

Corroborating this statement, Publice (2018) highlights that when the poorest population is not economically empowered, the economy itself pays this price, the consumer market is lost, and people stop accessing basic services, stop studying, turn to of unskilled labor, generating more poverty and recession.

The Oxfam report (2018) highlights ways to build a more humane economy to solve the problem at hand, for which an economy can be established mainly in two ways: designing more egalitarian economies and using taxation and public spending to redistribute and promote greater equity. Thus, prioritizing the interests of workers and small producers, and not the owners of large fortunes. Acting this way would put an end to inequality and poor income distribution, leaving the planet and future generations a more egalitarian world. This requires, “Recognizing the impact of the current dominant neoliberal economic model on the world’s poor and working towards developing more humane economies and promoting greater equity.” (OXFAM 2018, p. 15).

For Ferreira and Latore (2012, p. 2524), [...] social inequality is an inherent condition of the capitalist system itself, where a small group of people owns the means of production and financial capital, while the vast majority of population owns only their labor power. For these authors, inequality is a socioeconomic phenomenon that influences human health, is unfair, undesirable and avoidable and is based on the essential character of difference, presupposing exclusion.

The concept of social inequality is multidimensional, and there are major limitations of current indicators in covering all the conceptual complexity. The covid-19 pandemic exposed the deep inequalities in Brazil, and demonstrated that inequalities have race, color and ethnicity, as it is a country structured by racism, which remains rooted in the slave system. (GOES, RAMOS AND FERREIRA 2020).

For Gonçalves, Minicucci and Amaral (2017), one of the institutional mechanisms to solve or mitigate eventual differences and inequalities within a society is the implementation of public policies that act

directly in the chance of more equitable conditions, this is closely related to development. of social rights, defined as participation in the collective wealth.

Amar et al. (2001), defines social inequality as the equitable distribution of certain attributes. These attributes refer to goods, services, rights and obligations, power and privileges in terms not of personal characteristics and not of social positions or socioeconomic mobility refers to the displacement between different social classes, whether ascending or descending, which implies considering aspects related to “political order” and “economic order”.

Delval (2018) states that around these two aspects - politics and economics - revolve the main problems of society. When talking about economic problems, this author lists topics such as the use of money, social inequality, and socioeconomic mobility.

But what do children and adults think about poverty and inequality? What solutions do you present for these two phenomena? Why study poverty and inequality?

Amar et al. (2001) presents two reasons to investigate the understanding of the origins of poverty and social inequality: the first concerns the epistemological interest in providing a way of accessing the way children and adolescents represent the social world in which they are inserted. Such knowledge can help them understand the more general processes by which individuals come to construct a coherent and organized model of the social world. Such knowledge can collaborate in the construction of more effective educational interventions that allow individuals to solve problems related to the rational use of resources, stimulate citizen participation and the search for intervention strategies to overcome poverty.

For Delval (2018) the child will elaborate explanations about how and why things

happen in a certain way and about the functioning of social systems. Subsequently, the explanations focus on norms and values and these reorganize when they reach a greater degree of understanding, they provide norms and values with a new meaning, even allowing to doubt their foundations.

In the perspective of studying the phenomena of economic order, this study intends to verify the representations of poverty, social mobility and social and economic inequality of children in the 4th and 5th year of elementary school.

## **METHODS**

This is a research based on economic psychology, with a comparative descriptive design. A sample of 101 elementary school students was constituted: 49 males and 52 females, aged between 8 and 13 years. A clinical interview created by Denegri et al. (1998) and adapted by Amar et al. (2001), addressing topics such as the characterization of rich and poor, social class, social and socioeconomic mobility, causes of social inequality, and possible solutions to poverty and inequality.

The researchers adopted four levels through which students evolve in understanding the social system in which they are inserted. Level I explains poverty and wealth with fantastic and anecdotal elements, based on very apparent observable traits; at level IB, unrealistic concepts persist to explain poverty and wealth, it is believed that wealth obtained through work is a simplistic association between work and remuneration. Beliefs in meritocracy. At level II, the definition of the strata of poverty and wealth incorporates psychological and behavioral traits that go beyond the directly observable, presenting an initial understanding of socioeconomic mobility as a process that occurs over time and in stages. Meritocracy

continues to be valued. At level III There is a more complex conception of the existence of socioeconomic levels, understanding the existence of common interests and groups of individuals that make social change difficult. The concept of power and exploitation is incorporated and it is believed that social mobility requires social opportunities and personal qualities.

All interviews were carried out individually and followed the ethical principles proposed in research with human beings and all procedures were presented and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Goiás.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

After collecting the data, the responses were categorized with reference to the levels proposed by Denegri et al. (1998) and Amar et al. (2001), considering the variables, age, sex, and the school year of the students. To assess the level of understanding of poverty, inequality and social mobility, the authors adopted four levels (table 1), through which students evolve in an increasingly complex understanding of the social system in which they are inserted and what are the causes and explanations for the many verified phenomena.

A global analysis of the interviews was carried out and each student was allocated the levels of thought proposed by Denegri (1998) and Amar et al. (2001).

The analysis allowed to know the representations of the students regarding the concept of poverty, inequality and social mobility. Levels of thinking reflect the content of the structure of students' representations. Table 1 shows the distribution of levels in the sample.

Level found	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Level IA	31	30,7%
Level IB	45	44,6%
Level in transition between IB and II	20	19,8%
Level II	5	5,0%
Total	101	100%

Table 1 – Poverty levels, social inequality and economic mobility.

Source: Data organized by the researcher.

The level classified as “Transition” refers to students who did not fit into what was predicted by Amar et al, (2001) they present thinking characteristics of level IB and II, thus being in transition. This group represents 19.8% of students.

Student “A” is 10 years old, he is a student in the 5th year of elementary school. To characterize rich and poor, she objectively stated, “*a rich person is a person who has a lot of money*”, and “*a poor person is a person who has little money*”, he said that the poor have nothing and the rich have everything, and that a rich man is recognized by his clothes. When describing the type of work of the rich, he claimed that they work managing companies and that the poor are the workforce.

This student declared himself to be middle class and that his friends are mostly middle class and poor. In conceptualizing the middle class, he claimed that: “*These are people who have the things they want, but not everything.*”. He claimed that there are more middle class people, as these are the ones who “*They have almost everything they want*”. When asked what he must do to get rich, he claimed that he only finds a job that pays a lot of money or wins the lottery.

When asked why there are rich and poor, he mentioned that the reason is that some work and are luckier than others. He emphasized that those who could solve this situation would be the mayor and the government, through the stimulus of work

and financial aid. This student was classified at the “Transition” level, as he has level IB and II thinking characteristics.

Most students (44.0%) are at level IB, which corresponds to those answers in which unrealistic conceptions persist, beliefs remain that wealth comes from work or the result of inheritance or luck in winning the lottery. This is a simplistic association that those who work hard earn well. Meritocracy is valued, and the belief that social mobility depends solely and exclusively on individual will, unaware of the restrictions of reality, remains the certainty that if a person has not improved in life, it is because they have not tried hard enough. They consider the existence of a middle class, and assure that to end poverty it is necessary the action of the state or other paternalistic figures such as social assistance.

At level IA, 30.7% of the participants were found, this level is the most elementary, children do not have an understanding of temporal processes and do not perceive social changes. As for work, they imagine that any job serves to enrich themselves. The issue of social inequality has no explanation for this group of children, they are based on intuition and appearance.

In the total sample, level II (5%) had a much lower percentage than the others. This is a more evolved level than the previous one, students already have a greater understanding of socioeconomic mobility, although still elementary, they realize that for mobility to occur there are external restrictions, but they continue to prioritize and value individual effort. They believe that individual effort and a good education are determining factors to improve the socio-economic level, they already establish relationships between hierarchy and remuneration, but they do not understand the relationship between power and exploitation. They continue with beliefs that the state is solely responsible for solving the problem

of poverty, they already incorporate ideas of opportunity, although they do not understand the actions that impose obstacles to social change, their thinking continues to be centered on people's attitudes and behaviors. Socioeconomic mobility is perceived in a perspective closer to reality, but students think that mobility occurs naturally, that with time and work people will rise socially. Only 5 students from the total sample reached this level.

These results demonstrate that most students (95%) conceive society as two distinct and polarized groups: poor on one side and rich on the other. These are described from external attributes such as the presence or absence of material possessions. They associate wealth with happiness, well-being and health: every rich person is fulfilled, successful, beautiful and has many possessions, but they do not have peace and "God in their hearts". The poor have a stereotype of failure, ugly, go through all kinds of deprivation, but despite everything they are rich in health and God. The understanding of middle class is unclear, confuse middle class and rich, describes them as the same class is fragmented and poorly defined. They do not perceive the integration of the different elements that make up the economic system. Social mobility depends on individual effort and solely and exclusively on work. The representation of poverty is the result of inadequate behavior by the poor, who work little or do not know how to use money.

Comparing the studies by Denegri et al, (1998) and Amar et al, (2001) with this study, our students lag in understanding economic and social phenomena, with only 5% of students at level II and none at level III.

There was no difference in terms of gender, age or school year, these variables did not affect the quality of the students' responses.

This result corroborates previous studies by Denegri et al, (2008) and indicates

limitations of parents' educational practices in the economic literacy of their children, characterized by being informal and unsystematic.

Brazilian research on the representations of poverty and inequality in children is scarce. Roazzi, Dias and Roazzi (2006) investigated the representations of economic inequality in adolescents of different socioeconomic levels. The results pointed to the existence of a relationship between belonging to a particular sociocultural group and cognitive aspects of the representation of economic inequalities in society. An investigation by Bessa, Fermiano and Denegri (2014) with Brazilian adolescents found that the economic socialization carried out by parents and educators is insufficient for adolescents to deal with the demands of the economic world.

A study carried out by Bessa and Fermiano (2021) with adolescents from the conventional system and from Youth and Adult Education showed that students have little understanding of the elements that make up the economic system. EJA students aged between 15 and 18, of low socioeconomic status, had a better understanding of poverty and social inequality, considering interrelated historical, economic and ideological variables. The authors alert to the need for an economic and financial education that begins in the family environment and extends to the educational context.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Only 5% of the students in this investigation are at a more advanced level of thinking (level II) and none of the participants managed to reach level III, which corresponds to a clear understanding of economic phenomena. 95% are at the most elementary levels (IA, IB and Transition). No relevant differences were found regarding gender, age or school year attended.

With very elementary results, students are below expectations, with lag in understanding economic and social phenomena. They associated poverty with stereotypes, such as the idea that the poor are sad, unhappy, failed and that all rich people are happy and fulfilled, beautiful and successful, and they prioritize and value individual effort. Social mobility is seen as meritocracy, those who work and try hard will get rich, they do not establish a relationship between power and

exploitation. Money serves to buy and is available to everyone, they do not realize the social and economic restrictions. The social and economic reality is represented in an isolated and fragmented way. The participants were children aged between 8 and 13 years, and this study is very elementary and presupposes the need for a more comprehensive investigation with similar populations in the Brazilian context, with other groups and different age groups.

## REFERENCES

- AMAR, J.A. *et al.* La construcción de representaciones sociales acerca de La pobreza y desigualdade social em lós niños de La región Caribe Colombiana. **Investigación y desarrollo** vol.9, n.2 pp 592-613. Universidad de norte Barranguilla, Colombia. 2001.
- BESSA, S.; FERMIANO, M. B.; DENEGRI, M. C. Compreensão econômica de estudantes entre 10 e 15 anos. **Psicologia & Sociedade**, v. 26, n. 2, p. 410-419, 2014.
- BESSA, S.; FERMIANO, M. B. Pobreza: o que pensam os estudantes do Ensino médio e do curso de Pedagogia. **Revista Educação e Cultura contemporânea**. Vol 17, N. 49. p.45-65. 2020.
- BESSA, S.; FERMIANO, M.B. representações de pobreza e desigualdade social entre estudantes do ensino médio. **Debates em Educação | Maceió | Vol. 13 | Nº. Especial 2 | Ano 2021**
- DELVAL, J. A construção do conhecimento sobre a sociedade. **Ensino Em Re-Vista**, Uberlândia, v. 25, n. 1, p. 11-32. jan./abr. 2018.
- DENEGRI, M. et al. Desarrollo del pensamiento Económico en la Infancia y la adolescencia. **Boletín de investigación educacional**, 13, 291308. 1998.
- DENEGRI, M.; LARA, M. A; CÓRDOVA, G; DEL VALLE, C. Prácticas de ahorro y uso del dinero em pre adolescentes (tweens) chilenos. **Revista Universum**. Universidad de Talca. 1 (23), p. 24-38. 2008.
- FERREIRA, M. A.F; LATORRE, M.R. D. O. Desigualdade social e os estudos epidemiológicos: uma reflexão. **Rev. Ciência & Saúde Coletiva**. 17(9):2523-2531, 2012.
- GAIGER, L. I. G. A associação econômica dos pobres como via de combate às desigualdades. **CADERNO CRH**, Salvador, v. 22, n. 57, p. 563-580, Set. /Dez. 2009.
- GOES, E. F.; RAMOS, D. O.; FERREIRA, A. J. F. Desigualdades raciais em saúde e a pandemia da Covid-19. **Trabalho, Educação e Saúde**, Rio de Janeiro, v. 18, n. 3, 2020.
- GONÇALVES, G. Q; MENICUCCI, T. M. G; AMARAL, E.F.L. Diferencial educacional entre beneficiários do programa bolsa família. **Cadernos de pesquisa**. V.47 n.165 p.770-795 jul. /set. 2017.
- MELSERT, A.L.M.; BOCK A.M.B. Dimensão subjetiva da desigualdade social: estudo de projetos de futuro de jovens ricos e pobres. **Educ. Pesqui.**, São Paulo, v. 41, n. 3, p. 773-790, jul./set. 2015.
- OXFAM BRASIL. **A desigualdade mata**. Relatório de janeiro 2022. Disponível em <https://www.oxfam.org.br/justica-social-e-economica/forum-economico-de-davos/a-desigualdade-mata/> Acesso em 06 mar. 2022.

OXFAM BRASIL. **Recompensem o trabalho, não a riqueza**. Disponível em <https://www.oxfam.org.br/assim-nao-davos>, acesso em 23/10/2018.

PULICE, C. **Georges, da Oxfam: desigualdade e pobreza são inseparáveis**. Disponível em <https://exame.abril.com.br/economia/georges-da-oxfam-desigualdade-e-pobreza-sao-inseparaveis>, acesso em 30/10/2018.

RIBEIRO, C. O.; MENEZES, R.G. Políticas públicas, pobreza e desigualdade no Brasil: apontamentos a partir do enfoque analítico de Amartya Sen. **Revista Textos & Contextos**. Porto Alegre v. 7 n. 1p. 42-55. jan/jun.2008.

ROAZZI, A; DIAS, M.G.B.B; ROAZZI, M. A representação de desigualdade econômica em crianças e adolescentes de nível socioeconômico diferentes. **Psicologia: Reflexão e crítica**, 19 (3), 515-525. 2006.