Article

The Structure of Students' Parents' Social Representations of Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers, among others, are responsible for improving the quality of education. In order to understand the teacher's professional role within the context of contemporary society, one must analyze the impacts of political, economic, social and cultural problems on education. The present study's objective is to identify and discuss the social representations made by students' parents/guardians in relation to being a teacher nowadays. The study enjoyed the participation of 181 parents/guardians of elementary school students from the city of Mossoró/RN. They responded to the TALP after being presented with the stimulus phrase being a teacher today. Prototypical analysis (EVOC), analysis of similarity (IRAMUTEQ) and thematic analysis of content were performed. The terms most frequently evoked were patience, educator, love, and teach. The parents/guardians' social representations have a multidimensional character that is structured into two main: one involving an image of the teacher that is rooted in the notion of a vocation; and the other, in the professional as an educator. The thematic analysis also indicated a representation of teachers that is related to a work context involved challenges, precarious working conditions, social disfavor and violence. One thus observes a twofold representation of the teacher, as an individual with a vocation and as a professional, an employee of the educational system, a fact that could be related to the low attractiveness of a career in teaching.

Keywords: Social representation, teacher, parents, educator.

A Estrutura das Representações Sociais acerca do Professor entre os Pais de Alunos

Resumo

O professor, entre outros, é um dos responsáveis pela melhoria da qualidade do ensino. Refletir acerca do papel desse profissional no contexto da sociedade contemporânea, requer analisar os reflexos dos problemas políticos, econômicos, sociais e culturais na educação. O objetivo do presente estudo é identificar e discutir as representações sociais dos pais/responsáveis de alunos em relação a ser professor nos dias atuais. Participaram da pesquisa 181 pais/responsáveis de alunos do ensino fundamental da cidade de Mossoró/RN. Eles responderam o TALP após a apresentação da frase estímulo ser professor

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hoje. Foram realizadas: análises prototípicas (EVOC), análises de similitude (IRAMUTEQ), e análise temática de conteúdo. Os termos mais evocados foram: paciência, educador, amor e ensinar. As representações sociais dos pais/responsáveis dos alunos têm um caráter multidimensional, estruturado em dois eixos: uma imagem arraigada à noção de vocação; e o outro, no profissional enquanto educador. A análise temática também indicou uma representação do professor relacionada a um contexto de trabalho envolvido por desafios, precárias condições de trabalho, desprestígio social e violência. Constata-se assim uma dupla representação do professor, como aquele que possui vocação e como um profissional, trabalhador assalariado da educação, fato que pode estar relacionado a pouca atratividade da carreira docente.

Palavras-chave: Representação social, professor, pais, educador.

La Estructura de las Representaciones Sociales sobre el Maestro entre los Padres de Alumnos

Resumen

El profesor, entre otros, es uno de los responsables por mejorar la calidad de la educación. Reflexionar acerca del papel este profesional en el contexto de la sociedad contemporánea, exige analizar los reflejos de los problemas políticos, económicos, sociales y culturales en la educación. El objetivo de esta investigación es identificar y discutir la representación social de los padres/tutores de los estudiantes acerca de ser maestro hoy en día. 181 padres o tutores de estudiantes de escuelas primarias de la ciudad de Mossoró (Rio Grande do Norte) participaran en la investigación. Elos respondieran el TALP después de la presentación frase estimulo ser un profesor hoy en día. Se realizaron: análisis prototípico (software EVOC), análisis semejanza (IRAMUTEQ) y análisis temático de contenido. Los términos más evocados fueron: paciencia, educador, amar y enseñar. La representación social de los padres/tutores de los alumnos tiene un carácter multidimensional, que se estructura en dos ejes: una imagen arraigada la noción de la vocación; y otra en el profesional como educador. El análisis temático indicó también una representación del maestro relacionada con el contexto que envuelve desafíos, caracterizada por malas condiciones de trabajo, estatus social y violencia. Por lo tanto, hay una doble representación de los maestros, como el que tiene vocación y como profesional, empleado del sistema educacional, que puede estar relacionado con la poca atractividad de la carrera docente.

Palabras clave: Representación social, profesor, padres, educador.

In Brazil, education is challenged by new forms of knowledge acquisition due to changes in contemporary society and is especially influenced by the globalization of the economy and the existence of a new national curriculum for education. Furthermore, the population longs for changes, improvements and progress. Such changes are reflected in education and in the work of the teacher, requiring this professional to acquire new skills in different areas of knowledge. Due to the complexity and specificity of the teaching profession, the desire to be and to continue to be a teacher is also affected (Mendes, Baccon, Ferreira, & Rosso, 2015).

With the implementation of the proposals set forth by Brazil's Law of Educational Guidelines and Bases (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* [LDB]; Law no. 9394, 1996), in line with the educational policy of each region and municipality, the teaching practice was significantly affected, producing a resizing of the teacher's social role. It is worth emphasizing the LDB's great importance in the educational field, especially in relation to the education of teachers, yet at its core there is a series of specifications, limitations, restrictions, guarantees and contradictions that require clearer definition (Paula, 2012). A new role for the

teacher is thus introduced: to mediate actions so that the school and the family interact effectively, hence truly promoting quality education. The family-school relationship is one of the greatest challenges of the current educational initiative, given that the interaction between the two is full of defensive, accusative and unharmonious relations (Oliveira & Marinho-Araújo, 2010).

Such changes in the organization of the work of teachers require the performance of new functions that go beyond their work in the classroom, functions for which they were not trained, leading to de-professionalization and the loss of their professional identity as teachers. Within the school context, teachers must daily deal with the depletion of the functions performed by the family, the ethical crisis, conflicts between cultural models and norms, changes in the world of work, and violence (Alves-Mazzotti, 2011).

In a certain way, the LDB and the educational changes resulting from it supposedly seek to increase the value of educational activities. Nevertheless, the LDB actually ends up holding the teacher responsible for the Brazilian educational system's constant flaws, which are publicly divulged via the students' performance results, a fact that consequently produces various tensions, dilemmas, and new personal and social demands, casting doubt on the effectiveness of the teaching practice (Magalhães, Maia, & Alves-Mazzotti, 2009). There remains no doubt that the teaching profession has suffered economic and social decline in recent times (Alves & Pinto, 2011). Even so, society sees the school as the possessor of a "power" that many institutions do not have, given that it is a space for constructing knowledge, and the teacher is perceived as a hero (Mendes, Ferreira, Baccon, & Rosso, 2013). Teachers are seen as heroes because they face countless challenges, shaping citizens and guiding students' lives (Moraes, Oliveira, Santos, Alsouza, & Guedes, 2011).

Moraes et al. (2011) affirmed that students perceive or represent teachers from the standpoint of three different categories: vocation, which is characterized by a teacher idealized as a hero, a master to be followed, an idol who is

courageous, dedicated and committed; professionalism, which considers the teacher's responsibilities and involves constructing knowledge, shaping the student's critical awareness and being committed to social practices; and from a negative standpoint, such as a socially discredited professional, given that this category expresses depreciation of and increasing discomfort, discouragement and disbelief in the teaching profession.

From the parents' standpoint, the teacher is seen as an educational specialist who must assume and assist in the education of their children, especially when the parents are not present (Souza, 2009). The teacher is a professional that is seen as a superior being, a fact that unfortunately intimidates parents and produces feelings of inferiority in them, leading to a certain detachment from the school life of their children (Silva, Vicente, Ferreira, & Silva, 2015).

Within the scholastic universe, teachers cope with a wide range of social representations produced by parents, students, administrators, professionals and others who are directly or indirectly involved in the pedagogical relationship. All those who are involved are influenced by these social significations. On the other hand, both students and teachers influence each other mutually, and they enter the pedagogical relationship bearing such representations (Brito, 2013).

In the pedagogical relationship, it is worth highlighting the parents as important players in this process. Constructed over the years, the parents' views and values in relation to the school end up being transmitted to their children (Fontaine & Hamon, 2010), including the image they construct of the teacher. Being familiar with the parents' social representations regarding the teacher can offer one a privileged view of the issues that guide the relationships existing within this social space. Familiarity with social representations in the educational field makes it effectively possible to plan actions that improve both the quality of the schooling (Alves-Mazzotti, 2009) and the working conditions of the teachers.

The present study is guided by social and occupational psychology and by the theory of social representations. Social representation enables one to know and explain the nature of social relations within and between groups (Abric, 1994), that is, what is behind the practices and discourses that organize and support relationships in general as well as in the case of the parent-teacher relationship and, consequently, the student-teacher relationship. Comprehension of the representation system of the parents – one of the groups of players mobilized in the process – in relation to the teachers can provide a key for understanding the student-teacher relationship.

Social representations arise from daily life, the fruit of interactions that are established since birth, whether in the family context or at work, school or social events. In a certain sense, they are "naïve" or "implicit" notions that guide individuals and social groups, influencing people's decisions, viewpoints and choices. Such notions determine social practices (Fontaine & Hamon, 2010) because they guide behaviors and develop communication in order to comprehend and control the social, material and idea-related environment (Moscovici, 2013).

The social representation of a certain object is constructed collectively and is common to a social group (Jodelet, 2001). Abric (1994, 2003) contended that the elements of a social representation enjoy considerable organization and that they go beyond a mere reproduction of reality. They are generators of significations and meanings, and they perform an organizational function of the representation in a twofold manner: centrally and peripherally. Abric postulated that each social representation of an object is organized around a central nucleus (core) and a peripheral system (structural approach).

The core expresses the essence of the social representation and normally consists of elements marked by the group's collective memory (Mendes et al., 2015). Such elements are the most stable terms of the representation, and they reflect its facet that is most recognized,

consensual and rooted in social thought. The core is stable, coherent, and resistant to change, guaranteeing the continuity and permanence of the group's representation (Abric, 2003; Sá, 2002). Its function is to generate the meaning, determine the organization and maintain the stability of the representation (Pecora, dos Anjos, & Paredes, 2012).

The peripheral system encompasses most of the representation's elements, which are complementary elements, since they can produce changes in the central nucleus that are influenced by the moment the group is going through (Mendes et al., 2015). The peripheral system's nature is more flexible and practical than that of the core.

Social representations act as both a system for interpreting reality (guiding social interactions) and a system for pre-modifying reality. Based on the theory of social representations, the present study sought to identify the manner in which parents of students attending public schools represent teachers nowadays.

Method

Participants

The present study enjoyed the participation of 181 parents/guardians of students (male and female) from two municipal elementary schools in the city of Mossoró (state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil).

Instrument

The present study employed the Technique of Free Association of Words (TALP, abbreviation in Portuguese). The TALP is a technique aimed at discovering the implicit or latent elements that make up the associative network of content evoked in relation to each inductive stimulus (Nóbrega & Coutinho, 2003). In the present study, the objective of the TALP was to identify the semantic field of the social representations made by students' parents/guardians in relation to teachers.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted between November and December of 2015. The TALP was administered collectively and individually. It was administered collectively subsequent to two "parent-teacher meetings," and it lasted approximately 40 minutes. With the aid of a slide projector, the participants were informed of the nature of the study. Subsequently, everyone was invited to verbally participate in a test whereby the participants were asked to express words and expressions in response to the question "When you think about barbeques, what words come to mind?" while viewing an image of a "barbeque." Next, all of the participants received an informed consent form and the questionnaire (TALP).

The TALP was administered in four stages. In the first stage, the participants were asked to write, in a specific field, the first four words that came to mind when hearing the word *teach*. This activity merely served to direct the participants toward making representations of the teacher and not of the school. Next, we asked the participants to write the first four words that came to mind when hearing the inductive expression *being a teacher today*. Soon thereafter, the participants were requested to indicate each word's order of importance by assigning it a number from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important). Lastly, we instructed the participants to write a short statement justifying the importance attributed to the word to which they had assigned the number 1. This was done because we recognized that explaining the word that is best associated with the inductive term enables one to qualify the response, seeking its meaning within the context of the words that were induced (Galinkin, Seidl, Barbosa, & Magalhães, 2012). In the cases in which the TALP was administered individually, such testing was conducted by the researcher on school grounds (sidewalk, patio and quad), employing the same stages.

The present study was approved by the University of Fortaleza (UNIFOR) Research Ethics Committee (decision no. 1,444,016) and was developed based on the precepts established via Resolution no. 466/2012.

Data Analysis

Content analysis of the TALP was performed in three phases. First of all, we conducted a prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992; Wachelke & Wolter, 2011) of the words and expressions collected in the TALP, employing EVOC (*Ensemble de Programmes Permettant L'Analyse dês Évocatons,* v. 2005) software. This application enables one to perform statistical calculations, constructing co-occurrence matrices and dividing the induced terms into quadrants, taking into consideration the crossover of the frequency criteria and of the classification order of the evocations (Queiroz et al., 2015).

The zone of the central nucleus (upper left quadrant) corresponds to words evoked with great frequency and with a low average order of evocation (AOE), that is, responses provided by a large number of participants and classified as the most important.

The "first periphery" (upper right quadrant) encompasses the most frequent evocations that were considered less important. They are secondary elements of the representation that maintain a close relationship with the central nucleus (Sá, Oliveira, Castro, Vetere, & Carvalho, 2009).

The lower left quadrant is the "contrast zone," which contains evocations that were considered important despite their low frequency in the *corpus* of analysis (Bortolai, Aguilar, & Rezende, 2016). This quadrant can be made up of complementary evocations of the first periphery and can also be an indication of the existence of a smaller subgroup that sustains a representation that is different from that of the larger group (Abric, 2003).

Lastly, the lower right quadrant, known as the "second periphery," contains the probable peripheral elements of the representation, given that these evocations are much less frequent and are classified as less important (Taborda & Rangel, 2016).

The evocations we obtained were grouped according to a procedure of lemmatization of the terms (i.e., their reduction to the root term) in order to make greater homogeneity of the frequen-

cies possible and avoid ambiguities in relation to the categorization of the content. Wachelke and Wolter (2011) recommended, as a threshold, frequencies corresponding to 3% of the size of the *corpus*, which, in our case, corresponded to a minimum frequency of 5 for inclusion of the words in the quadrants. The division of the vertical axis (frequencies) for determining the quadrants corresponded to 17, a value that was obtained by calculating the median of the frequencies subsequent to the exclusion of the frequency of evocations below 5.

The cutoff point of the order of importance of the words (horizontal axis) was defined as 2.5, given that the words were ordered from 1 to 4 (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011).

Together with the prototypical analysis, we also performed an analysis of similarity, for which IRAMUTEQ software (Camargo & Justo, 2013) was employed. Analysis of similarity is based on graph theory, which enables one to ascertain the degree of connectivity between the evoked terms (Camargo & Justo, 2013; Camargo, Bousfield, Giacomozzi, & Koelzer, 2014). This technique is an ideal mathematical model for studying relationships between words and their connectivity (Mendes, Zangão, Gemito, & Serra, 2016).

Finally, we sought to identify the manner in which the terms behaved in relation to their signification, given that the participants furnished discursive justifications. In order to do this, the phrases were categorized, as in thematic analysis of content, considering the words of the central nucleus and peripheral system as main points for the categories.

Results

With the stimulus-expression *being a teacher today* as a starting point, 724 (181 x 4) evocations were produced, 166 of which were different words and 558 were repeated words. 100 words were uttered only once and were thus disregarded in the analysis.

The result of the prototypical analysis (Table 1) presents structural indicators of the parents' representations concerning teachers.

The most frequent words, which comprise the upper quadrants, correspond to 51.2% of the total evocations.

The central nucleus encompasses the terms *patience* (78), *educator* (66), *love* (53), *teach* (44), *dedication* (29), *respect* (25) and *professional* (18), which are located in the upper left quadrant for having been considered more important (AOE < 2.5) and more frequently remembered by a larger number of participants ($f > 17$). Despite not having been evoked with greater frequency, the word *respect* achieved the status of being the term that was most important ($f = 25$; AOE = 1.96) to the participants. With respect to frequency, the words *patience* ($f = 78$; AOE = 2.26) and *educator* ($f = 66$; AOE = 2.41) stood out.

The terms with a strong tendency toward centrality that comprise the first periphery (upper right quadrant) are *good* ($f = 20$; AOE = 2.50)*, responsible* ($f = 19$; AOE = 2.63) and *friend* ($f = 18$; AOE = 2.83). The term *good* is noteworthy because it exhibits a value that is equal to the cutoff point of the AOE (2.5); that is, it is the term of greatest importance to the participants.

The third quadrant encompasses elements that were cited by a smaller number of participants (less frequent), yet are considered important, constituting the representation's *contrasting elements*. Qualitatively analyzing the terms of this quadrant, one perceives that they can be divided into two groups: positive and negative. The positive attributes of the teacher are represented by the terms *affection* ($f = 16$; AOE = 2.31)*, great* ($f = 10$; AOE = 2.30), *competent* ($f = 09$; AOE = 2.22)*, mother* ($f = 08$; AOE = 2.37), *care for* ($f = 07$; AOE = 2.14)*, learn* ($f = 06$; AOE = 1.66), *companion* ($f = 06$; AOE = 2.00)*, commitment* ($f = 06$; AOE = 2.33) and *important* ($f = 05$; AOE = 1.00). The negative attributes of the teacher are represented by the terms *courage* ($f = 14$; AOE = 1.86) and *fighter* ["fighter" in the sense of having a resilient, fighting spirit] ($f = 07$; AOE = 2.14). The presence of the terms *courage* and *fighter* could indicate a possible change in the meaning of the representation since most of the terms that appear in this quadrant carry a meaning

Table 1
Prototypical Analysis of the Parents' Social Representations, in Response to the Inductive Term *Being a Teacher Today* (*N* = 181), Generated by EVOC Software

Word	Freq. > 17	AOE < 2.5	Word	Freq. > 17	AOE > 2.5
Patience	78	2.26	Good	20	2.50
Educator	66	2.41	Responsible	19	2.63
Love	53	2.02	Friend	18	2.83
Teach	44	2.34			
Dedication	29	2.48			
Respect	25	1.96			
Professional	17	2.47			

Word	Freq. ≤ 16	AOE < 2.5	Word	Freq. ≤ 12	AOE > 2.5
Affection	16	2.31	Comprehension	12	3.16
Courage	14	1.86	Difficulty	09	2.77
Great	10	2.30	Master	07	2.57
Competent	09	2.22	Intelligent	07	2.57
Mother	08	2.37	Cool	06	3.00
Care for	07	2.14	Attention	06	3.16
Fighter	07	2.14	Wisdom	06	3.16
Learn	06	1.66	Hero	05	3.20
Companion	06	2.00			
Commitment	06	2.33			
Important	05	1.00			

that is positive and complementary of the first periphery. Along these lines, Abric (2003) affirmed that this quadrant could both reveal the existence of a smaller subgroup with a different representation and consist of complementary elements of the first periphery.

Lastly, the periphery that is farthest from the central nucleus (lower right quadrant) encompasses the representation's most diverse elements; even so, they exhibit a connection with the other elements and retain the representation's most subjective characteristics. In this quadrant, one comes across the terms *attention* (*f* = 06; AOE = 3.16)*, cool* (*f* = 06; AOE = 3.00)*, comprehension* (*f* = 12; AOE = 3.16)*, master* (*f* = 07; AOE = 2.57), *wisdom* (*f* = 06; AOE =

3.16)*, intelligent* (*f* = 07; AOE = 2.57)*, difficulty* (*f* = 09; AOE = 2.77) and *hero* (*f* = 05; AOE = 3.20).

Next, the co-occurrence matrix of the evoked terms was analyzed via similarity analysis (Figure 1). In the figure, one observes four stars centralized around the terms *patience*, *love*, *educator* and *teach*, which most likely are organizational words of the participants' social representations of teachers. Each star is linked to at least five points. It is worth emphasizing that, in terms of the rank of frequency of evocation, the term *patience* takes the lead (Table 1), but in relation to the number of points of co-occurrence, the term *educator* exhibits greater frequency.

The *educator* star shape is made up of the largest number of points (*patience*, *teach*, *mother*, *difficulty*, *hero*, *intelligent*, *friend*, *cool* and *responsible*) and the highest frequency of co-occurrences (*fc = 83*). The term *patience* is linked to six points (*educator*, *love, companion, professional, wisdom* and *good*), with a co-occurrence value (*fc*) of 78.

Enjoying a strong co-occurrence relationship with *educator* (*fc = 21*), the term *teach* is located on the right side of the graph. In this star shape, one finds the terms *learn*, *attention*, *comprehension* and *affection*, with a lower co-occurrence value (*fc* = 46).

On the left side of the graph, linked to *patience*, the *love* star shape is made up of four points (*respect*, *courage*, *competent* and *dedication*), with a low co-occurrence frequency (*fc* = 56). Among the five terms that represent the *love* structure, the triangle formed by the terms *love*, *dedication* and *respect* stands out.

In the structure in Figure 1, one observes the existence of four central elements in the representation of the teacher (*educator*, *patience*, *love* and *teach*). They confirm the existence of two different attributes in this social representation (relationship with others and professionalism), which were also observed in the prototypical analysis.
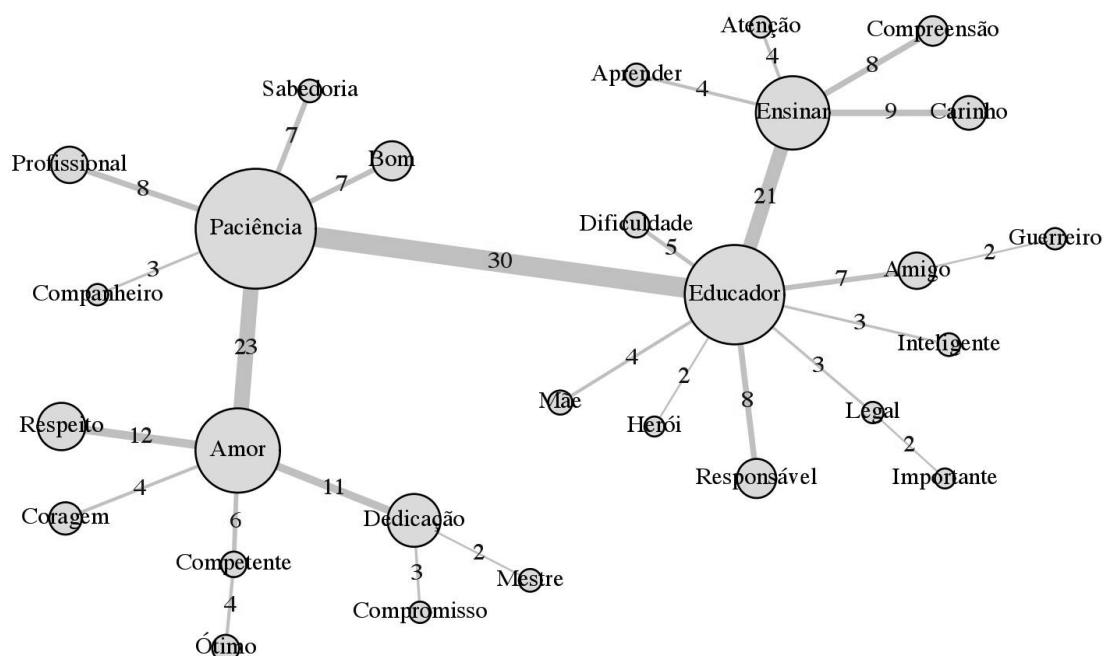

Figure 1. Maximum tree of the analysis of similarity of the most frequent evocations in the general analysis of parents in response to the inductive term *teacher*.

Aiming at comprehending the context of the social representations observed in both the prototypical analysis and the similarity analysis, we performed content analysis of the justifications furnished by the participants concerning their representations of the teacher. From this analysis, three thematic categories emerged that can be considered three aspects of the social representation of the teacher.

The "relationship with others" category consists of justifications that associate, with the

image of the teacher, a person who has patience, love, dedication and respect, emphasizing the importance of the teacher having a good relationship with the student. The justifications in this category seem to indicate that an affective teacher-student relationship is more important than a professional relationship that actually provides access to quality education. One observes that the image of the teacher is anchored in affectivity (relationship with others), as was stated by the participants when they reported

that "*the teacher is excellent because of the way he interacts with our children, the patience, the love, the way he treats our kids*" (P15). The participants explained that "*the teacher needs to be very patient*" (P22), because "*teaching is more than educating . . .; patience, dedication and responsibility are the key*" (P28) to doing a good job. The *patience* element is evidenced in the participants' discourses in this category.

The terms *patience* and *love* appear with certain ambivalence in the participants' discourses because they are also associated with overcoming the downgrading and terrible working conditions of the teacher. The parents explained that, "*above all, a good teacher needs to have great love for the profession and patience, since the proper conditions for good education are not offered*" (P38 and P43). In this sense, the terms *patience* and *love* shift from the teacher-student relationship to an affective dimension in relation to education. Accordingly, affection and love are seen as expedients for overcoming the difficulties one comes across in the day-to-day routine of the teacher. The participants related that, "*when people have love in any profession, they enjoy their work, especially as a teacher, who deals with life and with children being educated...*" (P145). For this reason, "*love is fundamental in the teaching profession because, if you teach out of love for your profession, it becomes a good, enjoyable profession*" (P179).

The "playing the role/professionalism" category relates to aspects of the social representation (SR) of the teacher as an *educator* and *professional*, a *master*, one who teaches with *competence* and *responsibility*, a *wise* and *intelligent* professional, one who conforms to the true function of the teacher. From this standpoint, the image of the teacher is tied to the professional who is committed to teaching, who "*. . . keeps a promise – he teaches, educates, is responsible, prepares* [students] *for our nation's future*" (P18 and P130); "*he is a true master because our children need education in order to change the world. Education, respect, professional*" (P20). The participants believe that, "*. . . if the teacher is good and diligent, my child learns*" (P168).

In this case, in the participants' statements, one observes a representation that takes into consideration the teacher's role in relation to activities that are inherent to his function. The teacher must handle the numerous demands of his profession and, in order to do so, he must be prepared and constantly learning. One of the participants stated that,

> *above all, the teacher needs to be a professional; most of all, he must be professional. I was once a student, too; today, I'm the mother of a student, and I know that every teacher has to be, above all, professional.* (P59)

In this category, the teacher is seen as having a complex role that demands knowledge, attitudes and values in order to handle the complete education of the child, who nowadays is involved in a complex social context. This notion is expressed in the statement of one of the participants, in which he relates the teacher to "*. . . a very important figure as an educator for our society, for he will teach our children, especially because he is a professional that educates all of the others*" (P102).

The third category, "challenges of the profession," demonstrates an aspect of the SR of the teacher that is anchored in the scenario of the difficulties that exist within the teaching context. Such difficulties are a result of the lack of proper working conditions, professional depreciation, low salaries and other aspects. Due to the fact that teachers face such difficulties, the participants associate the image of the teacher with a *courageous* "*fighter*" and *hero*. In light of this, they acknowledge that, "*being a teacher nowadays requires great courage to face the difficulties and obstacles that one runs into in the quest to teach and educate in the best possible manner . . .*" (P164); since "*. . . teachers with a fighting spirit face various challenges in order to attempt to give a productive lesson, without some of the infrastructures that schools require; a strong vocation and love for the profession are highly necessary*" (P163). The participants recognize the teacher's importance and the lack of professional appreciation. They reported that,

"*it is a beautiful profession, yet is hardly valued by our political leaders*" (P163). "*. . . a teacher has to be well paid to teach good things to our children*" (P20).

Discussion

Our results indicate the following factors as likely elements of the central nucleus of the participants' social representations of the teacher: having *patience*, being an *educator*, having *love*, and *teaching*. These terms point to a social representation of the teacher that can be divided into two categories, one that anchors the representation in the "affective/ relationship with others" dimension (*patience* and *love*) and one that anchors it in the "playing the role/professionalism" dimension (*educator* and *teach*). The latter terms characterize the rigid part of the representation, apparently less sensitive to changes due to the external context or daily routine of the individuals (Sá, 2002; Sá et al., 2009).

The participants consider *patience* and *love* – demands of modernity – indispensible attributes of the teacher in the process of teaching his/her students, substituting the timeworn argument of vocation (Naiff et al., 2010), a fact that reinforces the image of the teacher as a being that is endowed with a vocation, with beliefs based on *love*, *dedication* and *patience*. These are characteristics that identify the profession as a feminine activity (woman-teacher-mother), involving endowment and vocation as the main factors responsible for the choice of the teaching profession, with affectivity at the center of pedagogical relationships (Alves-Mazzotti et al., 2016; Gonçalves, Alves-Mazzotti, & Magalhães, 2010; Mendes & Baccon, 2016).

Affection, good interaction and strong personal relationships are expressions that indicate a representation that is anchored in the notions of passion, dedication, vocation, and love for the profession and for the children, historically constructed within the bosom of society during many decades, impeding the construction of a professional career; in other words, "de-professionalizing the profession"

(Alves-Mazzotti, 2011; Chamon, 2014; Gomes et al., 2012). Along these lines, some authors criticize the notion that the teacher must exhibit *love* and *vocation* as elements that are central to his identity, which does not necessarily occur in relation to other professions. This notion separates the teaching class from a more professional commitment, based on technique and competence, as is the case in other professions (Gatti & Barreto, 2009). Furthermore, governments borrow this discourse as a strategy for covering up the real working conditions and a poor conception of education.

One should not disregard the importance of the affective dimension (vocation, love and dedication) within the scholastic context, since mere technical mastery (of content, professionalism) is insufficient for the learning process to occur (Candau, 2011; Tardif, 2014). Nonetheless, one needs to take a critical look at the conditions offered for teachers to carry out their work and not allow the affective dimension to be used as an excuse for the insufficiency of such conditions. When one has a representation of the teacher that is rooted in the notions of passion, dedication, vocation, and love for the profession and for the children, it is left to the teacher to assume the image of the hero and "life saver" due to the fact that he has to practice his profession under unfavorable conditions (Mendes et al., 2013; Rocha, Mourão, & Bissoli, 2014) in order to satisfy social expectations.

On the other hand, one group of participants represents *being a teacher today* in a less idealized manner, in a manner that is tied to the professional aspect. This representation reinforces the qualities necessary for carrying out the functions of a professional more than the values attributed to a vocation: a responsible educator, who teaches wisely; a good professional, capable of developing skills, abilities and attitudes in his students, preparing them to respond to social and occupational demands. The teacher is seen as belonging to a more complex relationship that involves the school, the student and society. Lima (2012) lists a variety of activities that are the responsibility of the teacher, which range from mastering the subject matter, teaching,

and contextualizing education to developing the practice of criticizing and reflecting upon one's own work.

Figure 2 exhibits a quadrilateral that summarizes the social representations found in relation to *being a teacher today*. As aforementioned, there are two main organizational categories: *relationship with others* and *playing the role/professionalis*m. In this sense, being a teacher has a multidimensional character; that is, it involves elements of a traditional social representation, marked by vocational appeal and the demands of being a professional in a complex society. The participants represent the teacher as an educator that practices the teaching profession and needs great patience and love.
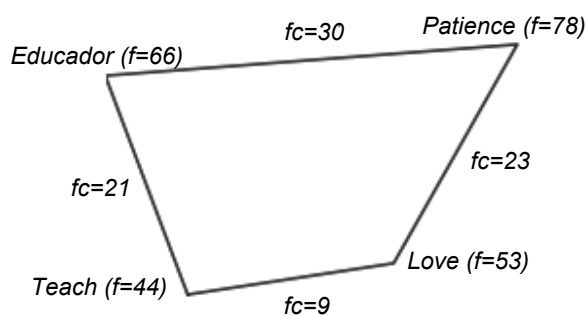
Figure 2. Representation of the teacher, taking into consideration the greatest frequencies and co-occurrences (*f* = frequency; *fc* = frequency of co-occurrence).

Within the current social context, which is full of constant changes and access to information, the act of teaching, a distinctive trait of the teacher, cannot be defined by the simple conception of transmitting knowledge, but should also take into consideration the complexity of the teaching-learning process, the plethora of knowledge, of diverse theoretical-scientific, scientific-didactic and pedagogical formalizations (Roldão, 2007). Furthermore, it is necessary that the teacher practice his profession with dedication, transformation, love and commitment (Mendes et al., 2015) so as to guarantee the quality of the education; and this is precisely the social representation found here.

Outside the central nucleus, in the peripheral system, the "challenges of the profession" category appears, in which the teacher is represented by the terms *hero*, *fighter*, *courage*

and *difficulties*, evidencing the incorporation of elements that reinforce the image of a socially and financially unappreciated profession with stressful working conditions. In light of this fact, parents express the need for a professional that is a *courageous fighter* and a *hero* in order to cope with the real difficulties faced by teachers. Santos (2015) warns us of the depreciation of education, which involves the difficulties of the profession, including the low salaries, the lack of professional training, and violence in the classroom, demonstrating that the representation of "being a teacher" refers to a risky profession.

Final Considerations

The social representation made by the high school students' parents/guardians we interviewed exhibits a multidimensional character; that is, it is structured into two main, complementary categories: one that conceives the teacher as an educator, who teaches; and a second one that links the teacher to the traditional image tied to a vocation that serves humanity, associated with the conception of education as an art propagated in the early days of the profession (Barretto, 2010).

In this manner, one perceives an expanded representation of the teacher, transposing the representation that is rooted in the vocational culture to that of professionalism, with disciplinary practices that tend to reinforce the meritocratic nature of teaching, undergoing a developmental process. Nonetheless, such attributes are unable to compensate for the setbacks of the profession, such as violence, lack of respect for the teacher, poor working conditions and social disfavor, conditions that indicate the inexistence of public policies that are appropriate to education and of resources that are sufficient to guarantee quality schooling. One may infer that this representation influences the great evasion of teaching degrees, and young people are increasingly disinterested in the teaching profession (Tartuce, Nuneso, & Almeida, 2010).

The little importance given to Brazilian basic education is manifested in the government's lack of incisive policies and positive initiatives

(Santos, 2014) and, consequently, is reflected in the representation of the teacher. Accordingly, the participants recognize the importance of teachers, yet they affirm that they are socially undervalued. Along these lines, Gatti, Barreto, and André (2011) stated that the image of the teacher contradicts the argument for the quality of basic education, because at the same time as the teaching profession is represented as praiseworthy, the teacher is socially and professionally undervalued.

Finally, the social representations made by the public school students' parents in relation to teachers are of a multidimensional nature and are fundamental for understanding the family-school relationship, especially the family-teacher relationship currently filled with conflicts and difficulties, which consequently influences the difficult teacher-student relationship existent in scholastic contexts.

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