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Identities and Structure of Teacher's Work: A Representation

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Abstract

In this paper one analyses and discusses the association between identities and the structuring of teachers' work resorting to the social representations that higher education students, future teachers, have of the teacher profession, an issue which is inextricably linked to the reflection on teacher training. The data indicate a strong connection between teacher identity and their work and between teacher identity and a certain configuration of their work: the work of teaching, as opposed to the work of learning, performed by the students. The new functions performed by the teachers have little expression in the representation of teacher. Students' representations reveal an identity which precedes work itself in addition to showing its role in the creation of teachers' work. The content of such an identity seems to be characterised by an industrial view of work, subject to a logic of production, leading to a perception of teachers' work as a bureaucratic profession.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives of the study

The objective of this paper is to know, analyse and discuss the social representations that higher education students, future teachers, have of teacher identity/ies. The issue under analysis is inseparable from the reflection on teacher training as well as a better understanding of the teaching profession.

The study enables the comprehension of the students' knowledge regarding their future career, namely knowledge that includes the culture they assimilated in their own background and that which they grasped at school,

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particularly the one they are attending. This allows for the understanding of the influence school has in the dynamics of social representations at the level of teacher identity and, therefore, the exercise of the teaching profession.

The pedagogical interest of such information is great and can be summarised as follows: The knowledge of the teaching profession brought from the students' own background to school alters as new information is received, coexists harmoniously with it or becomes resistant to it?

The answer to this question will support both training and teaching. For the purpose of maintaining their quality, it is important to ascertain if the new tasks that teachers are required to perform are included by the school in the nucleus of the social representation about teaching or if it just affects its peripheral schemes. Similarly, it is also pivotal to understand that common sense knowledge brought from the students' own background becomes the element which is most resistant to change.

1.1. Identity/ies and teacher identity

Two important approaches characterise the existing studies on teacher identity: a *cultural* one, in which the meanings ascribed by the subjects, the choices and the forms of distinction are highlighted and the *political and institutional* approach which favours the official forms of teacher identity management, stressing the state's historical role as producer of teacher identity. As Lawn (2000) intends to demonstrate with regard to English teachers, the task of producing "official identities" taken on by the state is not only a technology used to manage teachers but also a "fundamental means of structuring and restructuring work" (p. 74).

According to Castells (2007), identity is associated to a "source of meaning and experience," as well as a "process of building meaning based on a cultural attribute, or a set of cultural attributes which are interrelated and which prevail over other forms of meaning" (p. 2).

According to the same author (2007), identities "are sources of meaning for the stakeholders themselves," whether they are created by them and "built via a process of individualisation" (p. 3), or "formed based on dominant institutions." In such event, identities only take on such condition when and if the social stakeholders embody it and build their meaning based on that process of embodiment" (p. 3).

Social identities are always associated with a social context and a story. In turn, communities, such as professions, are not an essence with immutable attributes, but a dynamic entity, undergoing a continuous process of reconstruction.

This dynamics entails the individual as a stakeholder of the moving interests and he himself moves within a certain social, political and cultural environment. In this perspective, identities are "strategically activated by contingencies, struggles and are permanently discovered and reconstructed in action" (Mendes, 2002, p. 490).

In the origin of identity/ies emerges, in the individuals as well as in the groups, the need to occupy a social position. This status, perceived as the "symbolic capital of someone saying something, inhibits the construction, recognition, presentation and maintenance of identities" (Mendes, 2002, p. 491).

According to some authors, work occupies in such dynamics a relevant and central position. Lawn (2000), along with other authors, sees in it "a key aspect of the work technology" (p. 71). "The teacher identity has played an important role in the management of the educational system [...]. The production of an identity involves the state, with its regulations, political meetings, public discourses, training programmes, interventions in the media, etc." (Lawn, 2000, p. 70)

It is not an easy task to articulate identity and work in the characterisation of teacher. In light of this, two issues arise: one, stressing the role played by work in the definition of identity; "the issue of the work done, the position held in society and the meaning attributed to it constitute a dimension (...) of the individual and collective identities" (Dubar, 1998, p. 66); another issue, highlighting the role played by identity in production of work: "Identity can have greater impact on the nature of teachers' work than new material technologies, namely the national curriculum, school design or the organisation of classes" (Lawn, 2000, p. 71).

1.2. Social representations: a theoretical resource for the understanding of teacher identity

Jodelet (2005) characterises social representations as “a means to interpret and think about our day-to-day reality.” Essentially, according to the same author, they are a “*means of social knowledge* [...], “*socially elaborate and shared knowledge*” (p. 366), comprising knowledge which is common to a group of individuals, therefore asserting itself as a product and expression of social thought within a given group in addition to characterising itself by a dynamic means of understanding and communicating at the level of common sense.

Within their complex composition (beliefs, values, norms, information...) social representations constitute a cognitive system which reproduces and builds reality as well as a means to perceive the world and an attitude towards it, building a whole which, although it comprises the most varied contradictions, would be organised around a central nucleus considered by Abric (2008) as “the core element of representation” to the extent that “it simultaneously determines its meaning and organisation” (p. 21). According to Abric (2008), the central nucleus of a representation is responsible for ensuring “two pivotal functions: *a generating function* [...], i.e. the element through which one creates or transforms the meaning of the other elements incorporated in the representation [...]; *an organising function*: the central nucleus determines the nature of the bonds that bind the elements of representation together” (pp. 21-22).

In the scope of the present study it is particularly interesting to reflect upon the way the social subjects, young higher education students, become part of their groups and take part in the network of relations and influences in which they move and which share beliefs, values, norms, information and visions of the world with them.

The issue accompanying this reflection could be summarised as follows: given that social representations, within the several shapes they can take as a phenomenon, are perceived as something which enables one to create and understand their surroundings, it is important to know how the social subjects under analysis have built and build social representations in addition to the way they share them. The knowledge resulting from this process will simultaneously facilitate the understanding of teaching as well as allowing for a more enlightened focus on teacher training.

2. Methodology

2.1 Definition and characterisation of the sample

The sample of the study comprised 96 higher education students training to become teachers. The majority of them (92.7%) attended the 2nd year and the following degrees: childhood education, 1st cycle of basic education (25), art and exact natural sciences; 73.9% were women; 80.2% were between 17 and 23 years old.

2.2 Collection and processing of information

In order to grasp the structuring of social representations in its central nucleus, the free evocations technique was used in the study. The implementation of this technique consisted in asking the sample subjects to write down four words immediately coming to their minds as they heard the terms “student,” “teacher” and “teach a class” Following, they were asked to sort and rank the words they considered to be the most important.

The processing of the data combined two techniques: using the first technique, the evocated words were put together in homogenous categories, resorting to content analysis (Bardin, 1995); using the second technique, a four-quadrant framework was built, i.e. a contingency table which simultaneously combines the frequency (f) of evocations and the average order of evocation (AOE). This allowed for the understanding of content and structure of social representations.

2.3 Elements for the interpretation of the data

The data lead us to a theoretical discussion in two levels: one, the level of the general theory of social representations, and the other, seeking to interpret the reality questioned in this study.

In the first level one will retain the nature of the sort of knowledge constituted by social representations. As Denise Jodelet (2007) puts it, “a form of knowledge, socially developed and shared, with a practical dimension and which is used to build a reality which is common to a social group” (p. 53) and their importance in the dynamics of social relations and practices via the functions they perform: the functions of knowledge, identifying, orientation and justifying (Abric, 2008). In the second level, one will value the training context, in its pedagogical and organisational levels, as well as the students’ social and cultural context, associated with the role played by the teaching profession in the process of holding a position in society and the way identities are constructed within the groups in addition to the interference of such construction in the exercising of the teaching profession.

3.Results

3.1The student

The student is represented in the central nucleus as “learner” and “student” (table 1); in the first peripheral area there is a set of terms which, essentially, reinforce the dominant representation (“teaching,” “inactivity,” “hard-working”), in addition to showing the relational dimension (friend); in the intermediate area there is an heterogeneous vision of student, ranging from its consideration as an unique being with certain competences (intelligence, responsibility), to their representation as “child”; Finally, in the second peripheral area, there is an association of student with “happiness.

Table 1. Free associations arising from the word student: central nucleus and peripheral elements

Average order of evocation< 2.5	Average order of evocation> 2.5
Learner (54) 1.9, Student (54) 2.2	Friend (20) 2.8, Inactivity (21) 2.9, Hard-working (27) 3.0, Symbols (32) 2.9, Teaching (38) 2.6
frequency > 19.6	
frequency < 19.6	
Affection (3) 1.7, Responsibility (4) 2.0, Disorganisation (9) 1.7, Intelligence (10) 2.5, Child (11) 2.5, Teacher (12) 1.9, Person (17) 1.9	Future (1) 3.0 ,Challenge (5) 3.6, Happiness (15) 2.7

3.2 Teacher

Table 2. Free associations arising from the word teacher: central nucleus and peripheral elements

Average of evocation< 2.4	Average of evocation> 2.4
Friend (16) 2.4,Discipline (18) 2.3, School (29) 2.4,Teaching (42) (2.0)	Affection (22) 2.5, Supervisor (26) 2.8, Professional (27) 2.7, Knowledge (27) 2.7
frequency > 15.3	
frequency < 15.3	
Intelligence (4) 1.5, Learning (5) 2.4, Model (7) 2.0, Communicator (8) 2.0, Responsibility (10) 2.3, Education (11)2.0,Work(11)2.3, Communication (12) 2.3, Students (14) 2.1	Commitment (6) 3.3, Negative aspects (10) 2.6, Person (10) 2.7, Symbols (11) 3.3, Assessment (13) 3.0, Vocation (14) 2.6

3.3 Teach a class

From the analysis of the free associations regarding the expression “Teach a class” one perceives (Table 3) the reinforcement of the dimensions associated with the representation of teacher aforementioned. In this perspective, in the central nucleus one sees the following associations to “Teach a class”:

- activity associated with the act of teaching (*teaching, traditional sense*[†]);
- a relational activity (*students, interaction*);
- a profession (*job*)

Table 3. Free associations arising from the expression “teach a class”: central nucleus and peripheral elements

Average of evocation < 2.5	Average of evocation > 2.5
Traditional sense (21) 2.5, Interaction (29) 1.9, Teaching (39) 1.7, Job (41) 1.9, Students (45) 2.3	Vocational project (20) 2.7, School (27) 2.5, Competence (40) 2.8
frequency > 17.7	
frequency < 17.7 Children (5) 1.2, Positive feelings (5) 1.8, Negative feelings (6) 2.5, Negative aspects (7) 2.0	Assessment (3) 3.3, Education (5) 3.4, Knowledge (6) 2.8, Patience (7) 2.9, Dynamics (8) 3.0, Contents (11) 2.7, Learning (13) 3.0, Symbols (15) 3.5

4. Discussion

The analysis of the data shows the dimensions that the existing references on the subject consider as stable in the representation of teacher, their work and their identity: work as an enabler of the construction and assertion of an identity; an identity associated with a conception of work understood as interpretative key for the definition of teacher as well as the management of the educational system (Lawn, 2000).

Given that this is a sample constituted by individuals in training, it is easily accepted that one is faced with a group which considers knowledge and learning of the profession as key factors in its representation. Therefore, science would be performing "an important role as a source of knowledge of everyday life" in addition to "validating and supporting everyday decisions and ideological points of view" (Wagner, 2000).

However, it also draws attention to the fact that, at first sight, this common sense “solidified” with scientific knowledge appears to be little receptive to reformist influences in relation to the teaching profession. The dominant presence of the traditional context of work, as is the classroom, and the absence of the “non-teaching component,” in the school context, enable the understanding that it is difficult to include, in the enlightened common sense of students, elements that are considered essential in the reforms tested on the field.

The data suggest that future teachers: i) are holders of "professional" teaching knowledge; ii) have a sense of the professional identity of the group to which they feel they belong; iii) have their own vision of their courses of action while future professionals in teaching. Namely,

Social representations and professional knowledge. When students associated “teacher/teach a class/student” to the aforementioned words they made it clear that the “socially developed and shared” knowledge (...) and a similar and common understanding of the reality are the cornerstones of the construction of social representations about teaching: the first, seeking “the construction of a reality which is common to a social group” (Jodelet, 2007); the second, defining a system of values and establishing the way one relates with the surrounding environment (Abric, 1996), thus enabling the stakeholders to have a certain perception of teaching.

The social representations that students have of teachers’ work reproduce and reconstruct the reality of a profession known to them. They reproduce it when they echo external facts (the profession as they consider it to be exercised and as it is learnt), they build it when, taking on the role of actors in the process, they assume that “subject and objects are not essentially distinct” (Moscovici, 1969).

Social representations and professional identity. Teacher identity construction, as seen in students’ representations, cannot be separated from the construction of the content and structure of teachers’ work, both resulting from the social and political discourse, from the teachers’ dynamics in addition to the specific training of a group which will be exercising the teaching profession in the near future.

As shown in the students’ evocations, in the process of building the identity of the teachers as “a source of meaning” (Castells, 2007) for the community they belong to, that identity cannot be separated from the content of teacher action.

Keeping this in mind, social representations take on an important role via their contribution to the definition of the identity of the professional group, diffusing values which are understood as common, outlining territories and spaces of power and spreading differentiating contents (Abric, 2008).

There seems to be an association of the professional identity of teachers with the work done in the classroom. This identity is almost exclusively understood as self-construction as the respondents did not mention the possibility of a hetero-construction, namely with regard to intervention of the political power.

Social representations, guidance and justification for the action. Students are clear about teacher identity and teachers’ work; both show consistent essential traits, thus explaining the role of guidance and justification performed by social representations in the sense attributed to it by Abric (2008). According to this author social representations guide behaviours and practices, contribute to the clarification of the situation and act as a system that anticipates expectations.

In this sense, social representations would not only allow for a “reading of reality,” with regard to a profession, but would also become “instruments which support action-taking” (Dias, 1998) in addition to its justification (Vala, 1993).

Representations organised around a central meaning? “Social representations are [...] a specific structure [...] comprising two subsystems: a central system and a peripheral system.” “The core elements – the central nucleus – confer representations their meaning, determine the ties that bind together the elements of the content and ultimately govern their evolution and transformation” (Abric, 2002). Keeping this perspective in mind, the central nucleus would include the stable elements of the representations, more resistant to change, whereas the peripheral level is more or less open to interaction and innovation (Abric, 2008).

There is another conception associated with such a conception: that the elements of representation are hierarchically organised as a united whole in addition to being integrated in representational systems and sets of existing images, eventually influencing this same hierarchy and the characteristics of its organisation.

The data show that there is a central nucleus in the students’ representation of “teacher” and that in the articulation between work and identity, one outlines some of its most characteristic features, such as an ideology, a collective memory, agreement, stability and coherence.

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