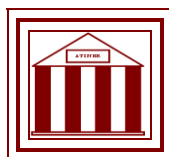


**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**EDU2013-0660**

**Social Representations that Teachers in  
São Paulo Public Schools Create  
Regarding their Decisions to Choose  
and Stay in the Profession**

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**ISSN 2241-2891**

31/10/2013

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Alves de Souza, F. and Puglisi Barbosa Franco, M.L. (2013) "Social Representations that Teachers in São Paulo Public Schools Create Regarding their Decisions to Choose and Stay in the Profession" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: EDU2013-0660.**

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**Abstract**

This work aims to identify and interpret the social representations that elementary school teachers create with respect to their choice of profession and what it means to be a teacher today; in other words, the main reasons that led them to choose to be a teacher and how they feel today in their practice of the profession. The interest for this research comes from changes that are occurring gradually in society, mostly due to the technological development of the communications media, and, in this specific case, the strong influence that the internet has on society. The internet is now participating in the construction of knowledge, since children are continually interacting with information outside the classroom. Therefore, we want to know how comfortable the modern teacher is in dealing with these transformations. Our theoretical framework is based on the theory of Social Representations. To collect data, we prepared a questionnaire with closed-ended questions, to describe the participants, and open-ended questions, to allow them to express their opinions about the current complexity of the teacher's role. The survey data showed that most of the participants did not choose to be teachers, but rather became teachers due to the lack of alternatives. On the other hand, approximately 40% answered that they chose to be teachers based on their ideals. We also observed that the teachers who participated in this study represent themselves as learning mediators and as agents for the transformation of society.

**Keywords:** Social Representations, Choice of Profession, Professional Performance

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## Introduction

From the moment the prehistoric man began to socialize, through interaction with other members of his tribe, he began to develop skills and abilities. One of these skills was exactly the act of teaching, which involves knowledge, method, and pedagogical didactics. The historical record shows that this concern with the act of teaching comes from ancient Greece, with Pythagoras appearing as one of the central characters. The entrance exam already existed in that time – Pythagoras applied a selection method to identify the most skilled students, who would both learn from him and also disseminate only what he authorized. In fact, one of the prerequisites of the candidate was the ability to identify what could and could not “pass through” the school walls. According to Gedj (1999), the candidates to be disciples of Pythagoras spent five years just listening to the teachings of the master without being able to see him – the teaching room was divided by a curtain, with Pythagoras on one side and the prospective disciples on the other. This was the way Pythagoras observed whether the candidate was able to “hold his tongue”, as he said; i.e., if he was able to keep to himself what he heard during the teaching sessions. At the beginning, silence was worth more than words. The curtain was extremely important in the Pythagorean School – crossing it meant having passed the tests. Furthermore, according to the author, the school members were divided into two categories, depending on the side of the curtain they were on. Those who were outside of Pythagoras’s space were the exoteric ones; those who were inside, on the same side as Pythagoras, were the esoteric, and only they could see him.

From then on, passing through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, up through the present day, how many theories, how many teachers, with their respective methods, emerged from each period! However, regardless of the period and the theory of the time, the teacher has always been the main “pillar” in the construction of knowledge, and for this reason he has always been respected and venerated as the one with knowledge and who knows how to pass along knowledge. But society transforms and the communications media comes along, breaking down the paradigms. That absolute master in the transmission of information suddenly has a competitor, and starts to see his students expressing knowledge gained outside the classroom. This, and the awareness that the education system needs to keep up with technological developments, provokes anxiety and changes in the attitudes of some theorists in relation to education. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vygotsky advocated learning as an interactive process and, because of the development of science in general, imagined the development of pedagogy based on psychology. He proposed a pedagogy focused on learning by doing, combining theory and practice, because for him education was a process of interaction, with life being taken into the school; in other words, the knowledge of each person should be privileged. In this sense, Vygotsky questioned the skills of teachers at the time, which in fact were not trained teachers, but professionals who had trained in

other areas, especially from the Russian Revolution and the First World War, so they did not have the full mastery of the subject they taught. Then, he demanded that the teacher have a scientific education for the exercise of the profession so that, beyond the knowledge of the subject, he could dominate the technique of teaching; in other words, for Vygotsky, it was time to establish a scientific pedagogy. And since, in his conception, learning takes place in an interactive way between the members of a society, the teacher is no longer simply the one who transmits knowledge; he also becomes the one who guides, conducts and encourages the creativity of his students. A contemporary of Vygotsky, the Brazilian Anísio Teixeira, was also worried about the training of the teacher of the future, as he explained in the article *Masters of Tomorrow*, in which he draws attention to the technological development of the electronic communications media (cinema, radio and television), that should be considered in the preparation of the teacher of the future so that he is capable of facing the media resources. Teixeira starts the article saying:

I believe, in the examination of the subject that concerns us, I must not only express the anxieties and hopes regarding the masters of tomorrow, but try to predict, in view of the conditions and the situation of today, what the master of the days to come may be. (Anísio Teixeira, 1963)

It is clear that he predicted, in his time, our current reality. Teixeira continues this paragraph, emphasizing his concern with the common education teacher and justifies that higher education is not in crisis, but rather common education, the teaching that reaches all citizens. If Anísio Teixeira was already drawing attention to the presence of cinema, radio and television influencing the construction of the young person's knowledge, what would he say today in the cyber age?

Taking into consideration the Brazilian elementary school teacher and the recent changes that permeate the media today, we believe that the teacher should, in addition to dominate the core curriculum, keep up with the changes of modern times. Teachers must be able to guide the students in contextualizing reality and dealing with the influence of the modern world in which everything happens quickly and without requiring effort. Thus, the teacher is left with the difficult task of leading and guiding his students so they may be able to build their knowledge, and for this it is necessary that the teacher prepares for changes and expect the unexpected, and we can foresee that the richest human possibilities remain.

Thus, the teacher, who is also inserted in this context, creates his representations about the system, since, according to Moscovici (2010), social representations are always a product of interaction and communication; they may take their shape and configuration at any time. In anchoring this principle, we performed research in the context of the representations that today's teacher creates with respect to his role in modern society, faced with so much information that the student can acquire through the communications media,

especially through the internet, where there are endless video classes in all disciplines. For Franco (2011):

The school is comprised of the plurality of ideas, values and expressions, and it is a space of construction and appropriation of knowledge. And in it, society deposits its expectations of economic and social development [...]. (Franco 2011, p. 40)

This plurality of ideas involves the student and the teacher. Hence the interest of this study is to work with the social representations of teachers working in public elementary schools in greater São Paulo. Our research will allow us to discover the reasons that led them choose the profession and how they feel about being a teacher today.

## **Rationale**

In this study, we assume that the orientation for conduct and social practices is directly linked to language, ideology and social imagination, which are essential elements for the analysis of mechanisms that interfere with the educational process.

From this perspective, reconsidering the role of the teacher in the classroom with children aged between 6 and 10 years leads us to reflect on the need for interpersonal interaction in order to improve teaching quality; namely, the student-teacher relationship is so important due to the fact that learning benefits from social and individual experiences.

In this context, researching the teachers and their social representations is fundamental, because social representations are built in the realm of personal experiences. Thereby it becomes essential to know the representations that elementary school teachers create, taking into account the interdisciplinary element, including the media interfering in the process of teaching and learning.

The decision to enhance the study of Social Representations as an analytical category in the field of Education is based on our belief that this enhancement represents a step forward, in that it means creating an epistemological break that contributes to the enrichment and deepening of the old and already worn paradigms of Psychosocial Sciences.

Moreover, not only for Education, but, in general, for the Society of Knowledge, the approach and performance of research studies on Social Representations can be considered to be indispensable ingredients for a more substantiated understanding of this society and for the acquisition of a broader understanding, more critical and historically situated, about what it means to know and what it represents to acquire knowledge.

However, despite its importance, as emphasized on several occasions, the study of Social Representations has not been sufficiently explored as a valuable indicator for understanding the broader social reality, as well as for decision-



making in the context of Public Policy and in particular Policies in the area of Education.

We know that Social Representations are symbolic elements that people express through the use of words, silences and gestures. Through the use of words, whether oral or written, people make explicit what they think, how they perceive this or that situation, what opinion they formulate about certain facts or objects, what are the expectations they develop about this or that, and so on.

In addition to the expression of knowledge and feelings, Social Representations incorporate guidelines for actions and activities. In this sense, we agree with Leontiev (2004) when he says that “social representations are miniature Behaviors.”

For this reason, we assigned a predictive virtue to Social Representations, since, according to what a person says, we can not only know his view on various issues, but we can also deduce his guidance for action. Therefore, Social Representations serve as indicators that are reflected in everyday practice of both students and teachers, as well as other professionals involved in the exercise of their duties.

We emphasize that the way the appropriation of this theory occurred in Brazil, starting in the 1980s, especially in the area of education, stimulated our interest in definitively weaving a net whose knots bind Education and Social Representations.

Based on the foregoing considerations, we decided to develop a study whose objectives and methodological procedures are presented in the items below.

## **The Research**

### **Objectives**

Interpret the Social Representations that elementary school teachers create with respect to:

- The reasons that led them to choose the profession;
- What it means to be a teacher today

### **Data Collection**

For the data collection, we used a questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were developed in order to characterize the teachers according to how long they have exercised the profession. The open-ended questions were designed to identify the social representations, aiming to see how the teachers see themselves in the classroom and why they chose this profession. This will provide a more appropriate

conclusion regarding the thoughts of every teacher on the questions, in order to respond to our research objectives.

## **Methodological Procedures**

### *Participants*

To reach the aforementioned objectives, 17 teachers, who were chosen randomly, participated in the study, all of whom work in schools in the State Public School Network of São Paulo – Brazil, with elementary school students.

### *Data Collection / Instruments*

For the data collection, an empirical study was undertaken with the use of a questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions; through the data obtained, we were able to provide convergent and/or divergent content about the meanings assigned by the participants.

When we applied the questionnaire, we explained the research objectives and the subsequent use of the data collected to the respondents, and we also guaranteed their anonymity.

### *Analysis*

This study was carried out in two phases: first, bibliographical research was performed with the purpose of reviewing the theories and studies developed by several authors on the subject. In the second phase, an empirical study was undertaken with the participation of elementary school teachers.

The information from the closed-ended questions was submitted to a percentage analysis.

We performed a pre-reading of the answers to the open-ended questions, and then began a pre-analysis on the content present in the responses. The data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to a Content Analysis, designed as a procedure used to make inferences from messages.

We conducted a “floating” reading, that is, a reading with comings and goings of the material to make it possible to create categories. Such categories shall be understood as a sorting operation of the constituent elements of a set by differentiation, followed by a regrouping based on analogies from defined criteria (FRANCO, 2007).

According to Franco (2007) an important purpose of the Content Analysis is to produce inferences about any of the basic elements of the communication process: the issuing source; the encoding process that results in a message; the message itself; the message’s receiver; and the decoding process. The inference is the intermediate procedure that will allow for the passage from description to interpretation.

Producing the inference is, therefore, *la raison d'etre* of the content analysis. It is what provides this procedure with theoretical relevance

by involving at least one comparison, since the purely descriptive information, about content, is of little value. Information about the content of a message (written, spoken and/or figurative) is meaningless until it is related to other information. The link between them is represented by some form of theoretical reflection that will give consistency to the linkages made between content and the confrontation between theoretical analysis and interpretation. Thus, all content analysis implies comparisons; the comparison is dictated by the researcher's skills with regard to his greater or lesser understanding about the different situations experienced and reflected about the assimilated knowledge about different theoretical approaches (FRANCO, 2007, p.29)

Words associated with origin word were considered indicators that enabled the creation of categories, taking into account the similarities and the proximity of senses and meanings.

### Presentation and Discussion of Results

#### *Characteristics of Respondents*

The respondents were 17 teachers, 4 male and 13 female.

**Table I. Characteristics of participants - Personal Information**

N°	Gender		Age					Marital Status	
	F	M	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40+	Single	Married
17	13	4	2	2	5	2	6	10	7
	76.47%	23.52%	11.76%	11.76%	29.41%	11.76%	35.29%	58.82%	41.17%

N°	Children		Years exercised in the profession						
	Yes	No	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25	25-30	30+
	6	9	5	2	4	1	2	1	2
17	35.29%	52.94%	29.41%	11.76%	23.52%	5.88%	11.76%	5.88%	11.76%

As shown in table I, we worked with 17 teachers, of which 4 were men and 13 were women.

This difference in relation to the respondents' gender reflects the actual conditions of the professional practice of elementary school teachers. That is, in Brazil, although it has been changing, women have always been at the forefront of primary education.

*Research Design*

The social representations that we analyzed deal with the reasons that the teachers create regarding their choice of profession and what it means to be a teacher today. Thus, we proposed to discuss aspects of the thematic indicators that, in the course of the analysis, became significant to support the Social Representations created by the teachers. The teachers' answers to the following questions are represented in tables II and III below: 1) what were the reasons that led you to choose this profession? and 2) what does it mean to be a teacher today?

**Table II.** *Responses of participants regarding their choice of profession*

<b>Explained reasons</b>	<b>teachers</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>
Personal preference		1	5.88%
Lack of options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the only profession offered in the region</li> <li>• no options</li> </ul>		5	29.41%
Vocation/Ideal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• belief in education</li> <li>• admiration of the human transformation</li> <li>• loving it a lot</li> <li>• challenge</li> <li>• delighted by the content and transmission of knowledge</li> </ul>		7	41.18%
Adjustment to needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adaptation</li> </ul>		3	17.65%
Financial interest		1	5.88%

**Table II.** Responses from participants regarding what it means to be a teacher today

<b>Explained reasons</b>	<b>teachers</b>	N°	%
Having commitment/Responsibility for transformation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• form critical citizens and peer educators</li> <li>• commitments of the teacher, the student and the government</li> <li>• fight for transformation</li> <li>• make yourself a window to the world</li> </ul>		12	70.59%
Mediate, create dialogue and humanize <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being a teacher is to inform, listen, mediate, collaborate, allow that the student indeed exists</li> </ul>		2	11.76%
Challenge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Be patient and try to teach something to one who is interested</li> <li>• face the difficulties inherent to the professional practice</li> <li>• assume the role of the student's family</li> </ul>		3	17.65%

As can be seen in table I above, more than 40% of the interviewed participants chose the profession based on their ideals, showing in their answers that they believe in the value of education in the transformation of the human being, and that the teacher is one of the agents participating in such transformation. However, we also observed that approximately 47% did not choose this profession, but rather opted for it due to the lack of other options or as an adjustment to personal needs, making the necessary adaptations to the moment.

Regarding the question of what it means to be a teacher today, table II shows that more than 70% of the respondents expressed that being a teacher means to have a commitment and responsibility to form critical citizens as well as peer educators and, in addition, to make yourself a window to the world. The teacher must also, according to approximately 11% of respondents, know how to mediate, create dialogue, humanize and allow that the student indeed exists. Finally, for approximately 18% of respondents, being a teacher today means facing the challenges of resolving conflicts, being patient and dealing with the difficulties inherent to the exercise of the profession, and that sometimes the teacher must also take on the role of the student's family.

## Final Considerations

Observing and interpreting the research results, especially the responses given to question two (what it means to be a teacher today), leads us to conclude that every person who embraces the teaching profession places himself in the context of education with clear goals to transform and leave a society that is more humanized, aware and harmonious than he found it, since for the vast majority, over 70% of respondents, this was the main subject of their answers. Therefore, we believe that the teacher will never lose his importance in the classroom, since, as showed by the theoretical conceptions on which we based this work, knowledge is built on interaction between individuals. Accordingly, all new technological innovations that appear in the communications media will gain their importance solely as a support tool in the learning and teaching process, because interpersonal and affective relationships are an ancient need of the *homo sapiens sapiens*.

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