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**THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS`S SOCIAL REPRESENTATION  
OF CHILD ON SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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***Abstract***

Starting from the idea that social reality, including the educational reality, is the result of a permanent process of construction and reconstruction of meanings and practices, the study aims to explore the relationship between the teacher`s social representations of the child and socio-emotional development in the second childhood. Investigating these social representations, we can better understand teacher`s professional practice and perhaps even anticipate the course of child development on whom teacher actions are reflected. The study general hypothesis was: the content and structure of educator`s social representations of a child (CSR), influence the development of socio-emotional skills of preschool children by supporting the occurrence of teacher-child interaction of "emotional support" type. The research methodology was a mixed one, combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and processing (free association method, essay method, observation method, prototypical analysis, thematic coding). Research findings were: the CSR content and structure outlines a "picture" of the pre-school child with an active functional dimension of the core, with predominantly positive elements, supporting a teacher-child interaction of "emotional support" and, implicitly, socio-emotional development in preschool children. Also, preschoolers have shown higher levels of emotional abilities, especially emotional consciousness, emotional expression, and prosocial behavior in the groups identified with higher level of two dimensions of teacher-child interaction: socio-affective climate dimension and teacher's sensitivity dimension. The research pointed out that there is a positive correlation between the level of socio-emotional development of preschoolers, the "emotional support" behavior of the teaching staff, and the structure and content of CSR.

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## 1. Introduction

We live today in a time when social reality is the result of a permanent process of construction and reconstruction of the meanings and practices associated with them. Even early education is under the mark of interrogations about the finality, strategies and resources appropriate to the developmental needs of the preschool children on the one hand and about the cultural, economic and political specifics of each society on the other hand. The responses to these interrogations is conditioning, at the macro-social level, the functionality of the early education services, and, at the micro-social (group and interpersonal) level, the efficiency of the educational activities. At micro-social level, very important is the teacher's reflexive professional conduct, her/his personal management of the scientific knowledge and common sense on the essential concepts that constrain the sphere of early education: child and teaching practices. By knowing what the educator thinks and feels about the concept of a child, we can better understand his/her professional practice and perhaps even anticipate the level of development of the children on whom educational actions are reflected.

The paradigm that provided the scientific basis for the investigative approach is represented by the theory of social representations which postulate the assertion of the human being as a thinking, reflexive person able to ask questions, to seek answers and generally to think about life (Moscovici, 1984). According to this theory, social representations constitute the functional bond between personnel and social, due to the fact that they translate, in a specific manner to the individual, but also to the social environment to which he belongs, the facts, the phenomena, the pieces of social reality. Also, due to the fact that, to the extent that social representation is a coherent and well-organized structure, a social representation is "discreetly guiding the social performance of the subject" (Neculau, 1996, p.37). Social representations are developed in the process of socialization in relation to ethno-models (habits, beliefs, norms, values, patterns of conduct), ideologies and theories existing in the respective cultures. Social reality emerges as an effect of the interaction between the specific representations of certain social groups. Thus, identifying the social representations of a group members on an object, fact, phenomenon or social process is a way of knowing the social reality of that social group. On the other hand, the knowledge of the social representations of the objects of social reality (social categories, facts/phenomena, social events/processes, institutions etc.) highlights the way in which the members of the group act as social actors, because the content and structure of RS incorporates their thoughts, feelings and actions, ways in which they define the social situation and themselves in relation to the respective social situation.

Thus, the question arises whether and to what extent the social representations of the child (preschool age) among the educators, translated into the attitudes and daily behaviours manifested towards the child in the context of professional practice, influence the development of preschool children, in this case socio-emotional development. We prioritized this area of child development because, unlike cognitive development, which is dependent on hereditary factors and adequate cognitive stimulation, socio-emotional development is more and directly dependent on the relational and disciplinary practices used by the teacher and, implicitly, by her social representations of the child. Also, the appropriate socio-emotional skills developed from early ages provide an important basis for optimal cognitive development and functioning in any social context, and implicitly for personality development and social integration of the future adult (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015).

### **1.1. The structure of a social representation**

The numerous studies accomplished since the 1980s has shown that the cognitions contained in social representations are organized, in a central core and peripheral system. Those contained in the central core (a few words) constitute an instrument for deciphering a particular social object and are used with great probability in making decisions about them. Therefore central core is relevant to the social action of the person or the group (Guimelli, 1993). The elements of the central core (or "common core", "central nucleus", "the representative node") have a great stability over time and have the role of structuring and organizing the entire representative field (namely the thoughts, notions, affections, values related to the object of representation), being indispensable for determining the significance of the represented object. The elements of the peripheral system are more subject to change, influencing the dynamics of the representations, either by passing them into the central nucleus, thus changing the symbolism of the representation, or by their disappearance from the representation field. The peripheral system is supporting or buffering the core, and may be descriptive (it allows the person to describe / interpret the social situation in a particular way) or prescriptive (it facilitates the manifestation of a certain behavior, of a specific action in a specific social situation). Research on the operation of central core elements. Guimelli and Deschamps, (2000) and Abric (2001) has demonstrated the existence of a double dimension - functional or normative - as well as a hierarchy of organizing elements, respectively the distinction between main and secondary. The functional or normative dimension is determined by the nature of the object represented and the purpose of the situation in which the subject (individually or collectively) is performing the representation. When the object of representation or the context of the representation implies an operative goal (i.e. the carrying out of tasks, projects, etc.), the size of the central core is functional; when the context is dominated by socio-emotional, social and / or ideological aspects, in other words if the object of representation is a social stake or has a particular intensity in the process of collective communication or in the realization of common practices, central core has a normative dimension. The main aspect of certain elements of the central core is given by their quality of being indispensable, absolutely necessary for the respective representation, the least negotiable within the group, the other elements being secondary (Abric, 2005).

### **1.2. Teachers practices influencing preschool children socio-emotional development**

Recent studies (Carson & Templin, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008 as cited in McCormick, 2013) emphasize that socio-emotional development is favoured by a complex characteristics of child-teacher interactions, known under the heading "emotional support for the students". Educators who demonstrate emotional support are attentive to the child's needs, are positive, constant, provide stimulating material, play and interact with children, share experiences, support the interests and learning of children by planning opportunities of learning and practicing social skills throughout the day. The concept of emotional support for the students was operationalized in the context of building a quality assessment tool for teaching activity in the 2000, called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, also available in the kindergarten version and the first years of primary school (CLASS K-3) developed by Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre in 2008 (Sandilos, 2012). The CLASS scale can identify key aspects of quality of teaching, which may be related to the socio-emotional and academic development of younger children. Hamre and his colleagues (as cited in McCormick, 2013) support a multifactorial approach to teachers' professional practices, operationalized (when designing the scale) in a

wide range of teacher behaviors divided into three main categories: emotional support of students, class organization and instructive support. Previous studies have shown that scores obtained through CLASS application may be related to changes in class behavior and academic outcomes for pre-school and lower-school children. Cadima (as cited in Sandilos, 2012) revealed in a paper published in 2010 that higher scores in the field of "emotional support" were related to the increase in emotional and social awareness, while Buyse et al., in 2011, showed that lower scores were considered predictive of poor relations between the teacher and the child (Sandilos, 2012).

The emotional support dimension of CLASS assesses the extent to which teachers establish and promote a positive climate in their classroom through their daily interactions and the extent to which the teacher demonstrates awareness (or sensitivity) to the students' academic and emotional needs (recognize children's emotions, help children solve problems, redirect problematic behaviors, and support positive relationships between colleagues, constantly provide comfort, reassurance and encouragement) (Pianta et al., 2008 as cited in Sandilos, 2012). The operational definition of the concept (used in the construction of the CLASS 2008) includes the following variables: the teacher's responsiveness to the learner's needs (if he identifies and responds to these needs), an open attitude towards the learner's own perspective, the absence of negativity, the feeling of safety and the state of good mood. Jennings and Greenberg, in 2009, showed that teachers who provide emotional support demonstrate positive emotions that are shared by students, are aware of and receptive to the needs and interests of children, and take into account their views on teaching-learning activities (McCormick et al., 2013). Classes with good scores in this area have "sensitive" teachers to children, meaning that they are constantly mindful of the children's states and needs and how they are satisfied. In such classes / groups, teachers and children support and respect each other. Emotional support for class/group is especially important for children from problematic family backgrounds and vulnerable social groups, and especially at younger ages. The authors of CLASS invoke research that highlighted the positive effects of emotional support in the kindergarten: fewer outsourcing problems, better focus on the task and more effective attitudinal and cognitive involvement in learning activities. (Zaslow et al., 2009).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The research was exploratory, aiming at identifying possible relationships between the characteristics of social representations of the child (SRC) in the socio-professional category of educators and the socio-emotional development of preschoolers, starting from the idea that SRC have the capacity to guide and prescribe educational action. Exploratory character is determined by the fact that there is no information about the relationship between teacher's social representation of the child and the development of preschoolers in the native academics (or in the international one). Also, the empirical approach tries to provide a different view of the educational action and its effects, respectively on the elements of the social cognition of the teacher that influence the development of the children (and thus to support the development of new directions for investigating the factors influencing the development at age early).

As a general hypothesis of the study, we propose: the content and structure of preschool teacher's SRC influence the development of socio-emotional skills of preschoolers by supporting the manifestation of emotional support teacher-child interactions. The dependent variability of research is represented by the socio-emotional development of preschoolers, namely the level and type of socio-emotional skills of

preschoolers. The variable will be measured by assessing the following skills: for emotional competence: emotion awareness (understanding and recognition of emotions), emotion expression, self-control of emotions; for social competence: ability to interact with colleagues and with adults, compliance with rules, the integration level (into the group of children). Independent variables, which indirectly influence the level and type of socio-emotional skills, are the content elements of SRC and their structure, and the independent variables that directly influence the socio-emotional development of preschoolers are the teacher-children interactions of "emotional support" type.

### **3. Research Questions**

In research was started from the following questions:

- 1) What is the content and structure of SRC to pre-school teachers? What content elements or what features of the structure could influence the socio-emotional development of the preschool? (Are non-cognitive or cognitive elements dominant in the child's description? Are SRC centered on the child and his characteristics, on the relationship with the child or the educator? Does the positive items or the negative ones have a greater weight? Is SRC central core functional or normative?)
- 2) Are SRC elements traced in the relationship between teacher and preschool children? Is an emotional support relationship? Can we identify a relationship between the content and structure of SCR and the degree / level of emotional support of the educator?
- 3) Does the preschool children have higher levels of socio-emotional skills in groups where an increased level of emotional support has been identified?

What characteristics of SRC can influence the development of social and emotional skills?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between the teacher's social representations of the child (preschool age) and the socio-emotional development of preschool children. As a secondary goal, we intended to identify some theoretical hypotheses regarding a relationship, possibly with predictive value, between the content and structure of SRC and the level / type of socio-emotional skills of preschoolers. According to this purpose, we set the following goals: O1. Identifying the content and structure of social representations of the child (CSR) in the pre-school education teachers; O2. CSR analysis to identify regulatory or prescriptive elements that influence relationships between educators and children; O3. Evaluation of educational relations - children from the perspective of the concept "emotional support offered in the classroom"; O4. Evaluating the level of socio-emotional development of preschoolers; O5. Analyzing information to identify relationships between CSR and socio-emotional development of preschoolers by mediating the "emotional support" behavior of the educator.

### **5. Research Methods**

To collect the data we used the following methods: free association method, essay method, and observation method. Data processing involved content analysis, prototypicality analysis (Bonniec, Roussiau, & Vergès, 2014) and thematic coding.

### **5.1. Free association method**

This is a method specific to the investigation of social representations that allows to identify not only the content of representation but also the polarity and the structure of the field of representation (Neculau, 1996; Iacob, Matei, & Boza, 2006), that is the organization of meanings in structural dimensions that can give way to interpretations expressing the position of the subjects involved. The subjects of the research for this method were twelve educators from a kindergarten with a prolonged program, who were informed about the purpose of the research and were asked to consent to the use of the data obtained, while ensuring the confidentiality. Participation in the research was their agreement (the written consent was not required). Also, the participation was voluntary, financially unmotivated, but curiosity to learn new things and, in some cases, the spirit of collegiality. The technique involved an inductor word ("preschool child"); each subject was asked to note the first words or phrases (at least five) that came to her mind about it. They were assured that there were no good or bad words. After the subjects produced at least five words or phrases they were asked to: appreciate the polarity (positive or negative) of each word (relative to the preschool child), rank them in order of relevance from 1 (most important) to 5 (the last as important), justify the hierarchy of terms, while identifying the link between two terms (the induction and the induced term).

### **5.2. The essay method**

This method is a form of the narrative method. We used to complete the information obtained by the previous method to facilitate extra data about thoughts, emotions / feelings, values and practices associated with preschool. Educators were asked to develop an essay titled "A Kindergarten Day" describing the characteristics of an ideal experience with preschoolers.

### **5.3. Participatory, systematic observation**

This was used to assess the level of development of social and emotional skills of preschoolers. For this method, was needed the school's management permission and the agreement of each educator to facilitate "infiltration" in the children group in order to fill in a scale for socio-emotional skills and a scale for the teacher-children interactions. There was three groups for the age five to six, and three groups for age four to five. The first scale was adapted according to the instrument "Assessment for the individual progress of the child" indicated by the Ministry of Education and in relation to descriptions found in the literature. For items that could not be assessed by observation, the teacher's opinion was asked (questions related to that behavior were asked). The scale for the interaction assessment was adapted based on the CLASS descriptions found in published literature.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Content and structure of teachers SRC**

The analysis of the data provided by the free association method revealed that the social representation of a child contain terms that are child-centered, generally positive. The negative meaning of some terms emerge in order to emphasize the need for special attention in interacting with the child. The central and peripheral elements of SRC are presented in table 01.

**Table 01.** The central and peripheral elements of SRC

Frequency	Average rank $\leq 3$	Average rank $> 3$
Equal and above 5	play, love, happiness, creativity, curiosity	desire for exploration, creativity, curiosity, inventiveness,
Below 5	patience, innocence, spontaneity, clever, indignant, bold, friendship, sincerity, cooperation, knowledge,	wisdom, gentleness, beauty, dullness, thanksgiving, cheerfulness, unexpected, informed, pretentious, magnificence, vulnerability, friendship, purity, emotions, enthusiasm, shyness, attachment, sociable, unpredictable

As observed in the table above, the central core of SRC consists of active terms: play (play / playful), love (affection / love), happiness (laughter / smile), and latent terms - creativity (imagination, inventiveness) and curiosity (desire of knowledge/ for exploration). These terms have an uncertain status - they also have ranks 1,2 and ranks 3,4,5 in giving importance to defining preschool child. The above-average frequency of these terms allows us to keep their consideration within or close to the central core. Their oscillation between the central area and the middle (emerging) area can be determined by the insufficient anchoring of these preschool features, so it can signal a process of adaptation, updating SRC to this group of educators. The central core have an active functional dimension that emphasizes the SRC role in guiding the perception of the situation and facilitating the educators actions related to preschools. These parameters of educational actions are "play", "love", "happiness", which can sustain an educator's "emotional support" conduct. Also, the increased frequency in evoking two categories of emotional states found in the central core of representation and the fact that they are most valued in the appreciation of the functional character of the central core may justify the assertion that SRC to preschool teachers have a dominant affective nature. So, answering to question number two, we found that the characteristics of the structure that could influence the socio-emotional development of the preschool are: child-centered, affective dominance, and an active functional dimension of the central core.

Possible hypotheses that we propose for validation in the future (with a representative sample and standardized tests): H.1. The socio-emotional development of the child is stimulated if SRC content is child-centered, positive and dominant affective; H.2. The socio-emotional development of the child is stimulated and if the central core of SRC has a functional dimension and the descriptors are positive.

## 6.2. Content analysis of the teachers essays

In order to ensure the validity of the results on the content and structure of the RSM, the analysis of the categories obtained by analyzing the essays was also used. A total of 23 pages (average 2,875 pages per subject) were generated describing the characteristics of an ideal pre-school experience. The idea on which the method was based was that, given that there were no limitations of time, space and resources, the projection of an ideal experience (according to their wishes and expectations) with the preschool would reflect with a fairly high degree of fidelity the descriptive and prescriptive scripts of the SRC. Following the analysis of similarities, differences and recurrences (indicated in the qualitative analysis of primary data), four categories were identified for defining and describing preschool child. For the definition of the categories we used expressions from the essays relevant to that category:

- two category related to the characteristics of the preschool: • "many development needs", with the subcategories "desire to know", "affective security", "play", "expression"; • "undiscovered potential", with the subcategories "creativity", "understanding ability", "challenge", "energy";

- two category related to teacher- child interaction: • preschool "source of enjoyment" (without subcategories); • "education with love" with subcategories: "mild disciplines", "freedom of speech", "accepting mistakes", "tenderness".

Thus, the categories identified by the discourse analysis of the ideal experience with preschoolers not only support the data identified by the MAL and the prototypical analysis, but also come in addition to them and to give them nuance. The terms identified as belonging to the central nucleus (play, joy, love) are also found in the high frequency descriptive categories in the teachers' discourse (figure 01.): play (8), source of joy ), gentle disciplines (8), tenderness (9) (the last three being subcategories of the "love" category). Also, the "desire to know" subcategory also appears with increased frequency, which may support the inclusion of the curiosity element in the core of the RSM.

### **6.3. The level of preschool children socio-emotional skills**

We found no significant differences between the two genres, and the differences between the age group of five to six and the age group of four to five are generally small except for the component "interacting with adults" and "compliance with the rules", that are due to age differences. The values of these two abilities are in the same parameters as those related to self-control of emotions. These three abilities are dependent on the maturation of the prefrontal cortex responsible for the regulation and control functions, which reach a normal level after the age of eight (Siegel, Hartzell, 2014). On the other hand, lower levels can also be determined by strategies / actions that do not sufficiently stimulate the development of those abilities. Similar levels in both groups and in both genres were recorded in the "emotional consciousness" and "emotion experiencing and expression" abilities, which may be favored by the existence of the "emotional support" style of teacher-child interaction.

### **6.4. The teacher's conduct of "emotional support" type**

We found higher scores (over 75%) in all subdomains in each group of children. This meant that educator-child interactions are "emotional support" type. There are slightly higher values for all the dimensions in the number one group age four to five than the rest of the groups. The free association method results of the two educators from the respective group reveal the presence, in the first two positions of importance in the pre-school child representation, of the terms "play", "affection", and "happiness" (followed by "joy, thanksgiving, cheerfulness"), which can justify the higher level of positive socio-emotional climate.

The socio-emotional climate is the component with the highest scores in all age groups, which may be due to the predominantly positive content of the SRC and the functional dimension of the central core, with two emotionally activated elements (love, joy), constituting prescriptive scripts which guides the teacher's attitudes and behavior in relation to the child.



## 7. Conclusion

The corroboration of the data on the level of socio-emotional development of preschoolers and the "emotional support" behavior of the teacher allows us to answer the third research question and to affirm that there is a positive influence of this conduct on the socio-emotional development of the children. This assertion is based on the fact that groups with a higher level of socio-emotional climate dimension and the educator's sensitivity dimension have also higher levels of development of emotional abilities (especially emotional consciousness, emotional expression) and of prosocial behavior.

The research pointed out that there is a correlation between the level of socio-emotional development of preschoolers and the "emotional support" conduct of the teachers, which supports the role of this behavior in developing the socio-emotional intelligence of children. More precisely, preschoolers have shown higher levels of emotional abilities, especially emotional consciousness, emotional expression, and prosocial behavior in the groups with a higher level of socio-emotional climate dimension and the educator's sensitivity dimension.

The main characteristics of SRC that we can consider as supporting the socio-emotional development of children by mediating supportive, empathetic, respectful interactions centered on the needs and preoccupations of preschool children are the quality of the central core elements and the activation of its functional dimension.

These issues open up the possibility, through continuous training strategies, of changing CSR among preschool teachers in the sense of introducing those elements that can support the socio-emotional development of children and the efficiency of educational relations.

The empirical approach of the paper has given rise to another vision of the educational action and its effects, respectively on the elements of the social cognition of the teacher that influence the development of the children and thus contributes to the development of new directions for investigating the factors influencing the development at early, by suggestions of hypotheses generated by data analysis.

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