

Social Representations of Parental Engagement in Poverty-related Contexts: Empty Parents and Full Teachers

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In this paper, I respond to the following question: What processes and mechanisms explain these limits in how educators represent parental engagement? I do this by tackling educators' representations of parents' environments and engagement. I conceptualise representation with respect to categorisation and I describe how educators categorize parents living in poverty. Cutting parents' environments, selecting certain aspects in the environment and representing certain zones as dense and others as sparse are the three mechanisms that I cover. In order to expand the notion of categorisation and the tension between fullness and emptiness, I present the concept of social representation from a systemic perspective and I refer to social representation dynamic as a tension between verbalism (emptiness) and ellipsis (fullness) in relation with my own theoretical work (Boulanger, 2016). Regarding my analysis of the discourse of teachers participating in a partnership program in Canada (Quebec), I situate this dynamic in school-family relationships in order to grasp teachers' representations of parents.

From the 1990s onward (cf., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), researchers in the field of school-family-community partnership refer to many concepts— beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, etc.—that pertain to representation. In particular, educators' representations of the child and the parent are considered an important determinant of educators' –professionals acting in school and other communities' organisations and performing an educational function—practices, actions and their interactions with the parent. This is central to understanding the disagreement between educator (particularly the teacher) and parent. This is particularly for families in poverty-related context, that is, when family members face the social problem of poverty and have to deal with the associated sociocultural and symbolic phenomena, such as the negative representations of educators toward “poor” parents and children. But the numerous models and typologies generally fail to grasp the process and dynamic underlying educators' representations because these models and typologies tend to be associated with a cognitive-behaviorist and associationist logic (see Boulanger, 2018). It is no surprise, then, that these approaches can't help improve the

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understanding of why educators represent the depth of parents' environments in a very limited way –the distal level in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model— and, above all, the dynamic and contextual dimension of parental engagement that I define as the way ,active or passive, that a parent relates with his or her environment and their movement from one systemic zone (cf., school, family, engagement in the classroom) (Boulanger, 2018). What processes and mechanisms explain these limits in how educators represent parental engagement? Responding to this question could help researchers' understanding of teacher-parent disagreement, particularly in poverty-related contexts.

In this paper, I respond to this question by tackling educators' representations of parents' environments and engagement. First, I conceptualise representation with respect to categorisation and I describe how educators categorize parents living in poverty. Cutting parents' environments, selecting certain aspects in the environment and representing certain zones as dense and others as sparse are the three mechanisms that I cover. Second, in order to expand the notion of categorisation and the tension between fullness and emptiness, I present the concept of social representation from a systemic perspective and I refer to social representation dynamic as a tension between verbalism (emptiness) and ellipsis (fullness) in relation with my own theoretical work (Boulanger, 2016). Third, regarding my analysis of the discourse of teachers participating in a partnership program in Canada (Quebec), I situate this dynamic in school-family relationships in order to grasp teachers' representations of parents. I conclude by referring to complementary and open avenues to tackle the dynamic aspects of representation.

REPRESENTATIONS OF PARENT'S ENVIRONMENT AND ENGAGEMENT: CATEGORIZATION

Today, people are part of a globalised world where being open to others' sociocultural environment is inevitable (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Educators have to extend their representation of the child's and parent's environment in order to include more and more levels, from the proximal to the distal. This is related to the ecosystemic concept of "expansion of horizon" (Kenney, 1979). This is crucial for enabling the educators to situate children's learning experience –which is both formal and informal—not only in the school, but also in the family and the community and to consider both the proximal and distal contexts. It seems that educators are partially able to consider parents' environments. This is particularly the case when they are exposed to the demand of (artificially) sustaining positive representations of parents and their competencies when they take part in activities aimed at sustaining professional development or when they participate in a partnership program that is often based on an ecosystemic approach (Boulanger, 2016).

Parental engagement is generally decontextualized through educators' emphasis upon parents' behaviors and attitudes and a series of risk and protective *factors* that are not anchored in the quotidian and informal practices in the family and the

community. The informal forms of engagement that do not fit schools' formal practices are often rendered invisible. For this reason, parents engaging themselves exclusively informally in school are considered non-engaged. Overemphasizing the formal forms of engagement also renders invisible the fact that engagement implies tension, such as when non-engagement takes the form of active resistance to the school (Rajada, 2016). Moreover, educators tend to overemphasize families' risk factors by making protective factors invisible, as well as to consider that children's exposition to schools' protective factors compensate for the family's risk factors (Larose, Terrisse, Lenoir, & Bédard, 2004). Not only are families' factors rendered invisible, but the dynamic and constructive nature of risk. The very act of referring to these factors effectively implies decontextualizing engagement that is transactional in nature, namely dynamic, emergent and situated in a constant flow (Dewey & Bentley, 1949).

This phenomenon partially indicates people's limits to access the complex and transactional nature of the environment because, due to the overflow of information that is particularly salient in a globalised world, people have to select and simplify information (Atkinson & Heath, 1990; Bateson, 1979, Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). For these reasons, people's (or what concerns me, educators) access to the depths of the environment is limited (see Brunswick for a systemic analysis), particularly to seize how systems overlap and interact in a dynamic way. Educators generally make sense of the distal (with is far from them and unfamiliar) by reference to the proximal (Weiss, 1978), to *what is familiar to them*.

The cultural constraints (school conventions) that guide educators' representation and actions (Valsiner, 1987) are those that are enacted in their proximal context (school). Even in a globalised context, such centripetal movement is present as a means for them to retrieve familiarity and a sense of security (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). They tend to represent what is far and unfamiliar with respect to their own local (proximal) conventions. Being open to the unfamiliar in a way to benefit from others' resources is still an important social issue.

The distal dimension of the well-known ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) is experienced proximally and not distally. Hence, educators being closed to *others' proximal context and familiarity*, to what makes sense for others contextually. Yet, as Bronfenbrenner did (Boulanger, 2019, this Special Issue), educators create division in the whole environment in order to create such (exclusive) distinction between systems, particularly between MY environment and YOUR environment. Educators' creation of an *ecosystem* out of an *environment* thus entails creating divisions. They cut somewhere. Hence, this cut is arbitrary (Asendorph & Valsiner, 1992).

Bateson (1979) displays the necessity, but also the arbitrariness, of such a sociocognitive tendency: "The division of the perceived universe into parts and wholes is convenient and may be necessary, but no necessity determines how it shall be done" (p. 38). This is part of categorisation that implies fixing or situating objects

and people into classes under the impulse of the person's beliefs or attitudes and social conventions. Categorisation is related to sense-making and creates orientations (guidance) for action:

"A scene for an individual, therefore, consists of signs which signify for him, within the categories of his social order, what an object is, i.e., into which category it falls. This categorization has obvious implications for action with respect to that characterized entity. Classified one way, one course of action is obligatory or compelling. Classified another way, a different course of action is demanded" (Wapner, Kaplan, & Cohen, 1973, p. 277).

In this excerpt, Wapner and his colleagues (1973) display the prescriptive nature of categorisation and the fact that this is part of the sociocultural demands in social settings. Categorisation is culturally-guided through conventions or constraints:

"However, as has been claimed elsewhere (Winogard, 1989, 1990), there is no way to know a priori where is the correct point to place the boundary between the person and the world. Thus, any divisions that are drawn between the person and the environment are purely social conventions. Like other social conventions, particular person-environment boundaries become codified constraints" (Valsiner & Winogard, 1992, p. 6).

In situations of poverty, the categorisation of parents as good versus bad or engaged versus not engaged and the overemphasis of formal over informal engagement imply a construction of cultural dichotomies. It particularly involves creating permeable boundaries between, first, who and what kind of action are expected in school ("good" types of parents) and, second, what categories of engagement (informal) and parents ("bad" type of parents) pertained to non-school environments. Parent-teacher disagreement is constructed as differences to be treated and eliminated according to school conventions. When they face the unfamiliar, educators (and people in general) used the latter, both to homogenize families and to create mutually exclusive dichotomies (Valsiner & Cairns, 1992).

They make sense of the *unfamiliar* by means of class or categories: "Above all, the relation between the report and that **mysterious** thing reported tends to have the nature of a *classification*, an assignment of the thing to a class. Naming is always classifying, and mapping is essentially the same as naming" (Bateson, 1979, p. 30; the emphasis is mine). Bateson (1972, 1979) maintains that people divide their environment in zones and maximize certain aspects at the expense of others in an either/or logic (Me against YOU).

It happens particularly when people are exposed to too much information in a complex environment. Not only are elements and zones arbitrarily selected – according to cultural conventions— in the environment, but also the way they interact:

*“Evidently, the universe is characterized by an uneven distribution of causal and other types of linkage between its parts; that is, there are regions of **dense** linkage separated from each other by regions of less dense linkage. It may be that there are necessarily and inevitably processes which are responsive to the **density** of interconnection so that density is increased or **sparsity** is made **more sparse**. In such a case, the universe would necessarily present an appearance in which wholes would be bounded by the relative sparseness of their interconnection”* (Bateson, 1979, p. 38; the emphasis is mine).

This excerpt is very important, because it sheds light on how educators invest certain systemic zones of the environment, construct and manipulate the link between the zones or their systemic elements. I consider density as indicating *fullness* of environments’ zones or the linkage between zones, for instance, school and family or different areas in the school institution. It refers to situations in which educators face objects that make sense for them and that they invest in. It can also entail educators being overloaded, for example, by too many demands from parents or political agents. On the other hand, sparsity indicates empty zones that do not make sense or are not invested in. Educators may feel the emptiness of certain zones when an object – parental engagement that is informal in nature— does not make sense in relation to their usual way of acting and understanding (formal way to engage). Conceptually, it happens in the relation between structure (frame of action and representation) and object (more on this later). There is a constant tension between fullness and emptiness that is systemic in nature (Tateo & Marsico, 2013). The analysis of fullness and emptiness by Lighfoot (2004) partially illustrates this dynamic. Through educators’ representations, she displays the contrast between, first, “bad” and poor parents whose environment is filled with risk factors and, second, “good” and rich parents whose environment is filled with protective factors. The former are understood as *empty* vases that need to be filled (with scholarly content) as opposed to the latter which are already *full* (of ideas, concepts, culture, etc.). In this case, not only zones but, also specific individuals, are constructed as empty or full. I can also consider how educators deal with the fullness (density) and emptiness (sparseness) of their own systemic zones. For instance, educators often feel overloaded by parents’ complaints –the traffic of information, demands, questions and complaints is too dense— particularly with parents that are considered rich (constructed as such). On the other hand, as mentioned before, the possibility of being exposed to the *unfamiliar* parents in poverty-related contexts could make them feel empty.

Particularly in neoliberal context, educators receive more and more demands from the school and the political agents, for instance, engaging parents. These demands, which could make them feel overloaded, are culturally grounded and they come with social suggestions or constraints (“you must involve parents in X or Y ways”). It happens particularly in partnership programs guiding educators’ reaching practices. These programs are associated with some conceptual framework, particularly

Epstein's model in the US. Educators face a double unfamiliarity: that of school and political demands on the first hand, and that of parents' presence (or absence) in school on the other hand.

How is the tension between density (fullness) and sparseness (emptiness) at play when educators face a strange reality (the parent, the child and their environment) and manage it by *making the unfamiliar familiar*? How do educators experience emptiness and fullness in their environment when exposed to both the parents and the demands (to engaged parents on X or Y ways) from political agents? Applying social representation theory (SRT) to school-family relationships will deepen my understanding of these systemic phenomena, expand the concepts of fullness and emptiness and enable me to respond to these two questions.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE FIELD OF SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

General Presentation of Social Representation Theory and its Systemic Basis

Social representation's main function is to *make the unfamiliar familiar*. They thus act as constraints (Boulanger, 2016) when people face a strange situation. Social representations are social structures or forms (Boulanger & Christensen, 2018). The systemic and structural orientation of SRT is well established by referencing some spatial concepts that express the representational process:

*“By dividing the world in **zones** where the act of communicating is either free or not, good or bad, we manage to fix and regulate the **transition** from one group to another, from one reality to another, in short, from one culture to another. [...] The general framework in which the idea of this discipline is entirely grasped contributes not only to establish the functions that we associate with it, but also defines a **zone of possible orientations**. [...] Now we can look at this reflection more closely by observing how the **directions** existing within each sector constitute the same number of reference points that can shed light on representation in various ways by organizing around it **a network of meaning**. This has a **structuring effect**, because it is an integral part of the act of representing, **one's self** and **one's results**” (Moscovici, 1961, p. 199-200; loose translation).*

In the excerpt, Moscovici defines the anchoring process —situating an object in society in line with usual categories, domains and social spaces (e.g., institutions)—with respect to certain structural zones in the midst of the relationship between the individual and the environment. It implies making the unfamiliar familiar. Objectifying a reality implies making concrete and present —by naturalisation or entification—what is abstract or far from us.

In the last excerpt, there are the ideas of zones and guidance also presented in the previous section. Social representation acts as a constraint and resource that orients the way information transits from one system to another, such as when a group is exposed to someone (strange) from another group. Social representations are based on frontiers that constrain people's orientations in the environment: "[E]ach experience is added to a [based on] reality predetermined by conventions, which clearly define its frontiers and distinguish significant from non-significant messages and which link *each part with the whole*, and assign each individual to a distinct category" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 8). These constraints effect people's orientation in the environment and are constructed through frontiers' reconfiguration when the relationship between part (object) and whole (structure) is modified. Social representation is thus both the ground for, as well as based on, how the object – perhaps a parent— is transferred from one zone to another in the environment such as when educators face parents (unfamiliar).

Fullness and emptiness: Ellipsis and Verbalism

The tension between fullness and emptiness that I highlighted in the previous section is at the midst of this reconfiguration of part/whole or object/structure relationship. I can find some indices of this in the concepts of ellipsis (fullness) and verbalism (emptiness), which are very secondarily present in Moscovici's (1961) (founder of SRT) work and rarely mentioned in literature on the SRT. To simplify, I tackle the dynamic aspects –the resolution of ellipsis and verbalism as respectively indicating fullness and emptiness (I don't refer here to the semiotic dimension)— of social representation processes without explicitly demonstrating how these dynamics are related to anchoring and objectification (see Boulanger, 2016). I continue to situate my analysis in a systemic approach and I extend SRT by delving into these dynamics.

Ellipsis and verbalism concepts are defined as follow:

*"Groups as much as individuals experience both a plethora and a dearth of forms of knowledge and languages that they **do not have the means to associate with realities**, and realities that they cannot or must not associate with those forms of knowledge and those languages. **Ellipsis** on the one hand and volubility on the other are both expressions of this state of disequilibrium. When an object from the outside world—be it a rocket or relativity—penetrates our field of attention, that disequilibrium increases as the contrast between the **fullness of the ellipsis** and the emptiness of the volubility becomes greater. If we are to decrease both the tension and the disequilibrium, **the strange content must be decanted into a familiar content**, and what was outside our world must come inside it. To be more specific, we have to make the **unaccustomed familiar** and the familiar unaccustomed, and change the world whilst ensuring that it remains our world. This is only possible if we make languages and knowledge **from regions where they are abundant pass through communicating vessels towards regions where they are in short supply**, and vice versa. We*

*have to make the **ellipsis chatter**, and make the chatter elliptical*" (Moscovici, 2008, p. 17; emphasis added).

In this excerpt, I have indicated in bold character what stands for ellipsis and I underline what stands for verbalism (volubility). Ellipsis therefore means that a full structure cannot unload to reaches for an empty object in a way that eases the tension or resolve fullness by reaching for an empty object. To resolve fullness, people have to mobilize their sociocognitive structure to accommodate the object in a way that makes this object familiar, to render present an object that was absent in their universe. Individuals will thus use their usual structure to anchor the object. On the other side, verbalism means that a new (empty) object coming into the individual's world cannot reaches for a structure (to fill it and thus resolve the tension engendered by emptiness). The object is experienced of as empty because it is not attached to people's usual conventions (structures). To resolve the tension engendered by emptiness, people have to make the object reaching for their structure and allow for their modification (by assimilation meaning changing a structure).

I can refer to an example provided by Moscovici (1961) in line with the "appropriation" of the psychoanalytic theory (from Freud and the scientists in the external universe) by the (local and internal universe) French population (in his thesis in which he develops the SRT) in the late 1950's. To make sense of the relationship between psychoanalyst and client (this relationship as an object received from the external world and thus managed), which was previously unknown to the members of this population, the latter begin to (re)present reality, which is to say to present it again but in a new way. Because the psychoanalyst-client relationship does not fit their usual way of capturing this kind of institutionalized relationship, which is to say by means of confessor-confessed relationship (confession as the object) in a religious cognitive structure, the members of this population open up this framework (structure of confessor-confessed relationship). This allows the external object to enter and become part of the framework, so that a new whole is created and that the framework is (re)structured. The internal idea (confession) still remains attached to this framework, but now it expresses a new idea: it becomes a sign of the psychoanalyst-client relationship.

To resolve the *ellipsis*, people have to anchor the object they receive from the external world with respect to their usual way of thinking (structure). Hence the structure has to open itself to capture the object; *the structure reaches for the object*. On the other side, the object that is floating has to be attached to a structure. *The object reaches for the structure.*² Allowing for this is a way of solving verbalism. As far as the object could be considered of as a human, I can think here of parent reaching for school structures (conventions). Educators guide this interaction between parent (object) and school (structures). Educators canalise the interaction between object and environment when they experience a tension between fullness and emptiness.

² By way of objectification, the object reaches for a structure. It thus become attached to it. Parent is objectified through school conventions.

This tension happens when objects circulate and cross boundaries (parents entering school) to reach for structures or when structures (schools) attract objects (educators actively reaching for parents when canalising). Educators also experience a form of canalisation, for instance, in the case of political agents constraining the way educators interact with parents by making social suggestions.

Generally, I am interested by how educators receive an object entering their world from the external universe, be it a strange *idea* conveyed by a political agent or the *presence* of unfamiliar parents in school (more precisely the movement of the parent from home to school). In both cases, educators face an object (idea or parent) that they have to fit into their structure (sociocognitive and cultural environment). They load (making dense) and unload (making sparse) certain zones of their environment at the interplay between the object and their structural environment, for instance by attracting parents in certain zones (guiding parent's relationship with school) in outreach practices. I can also consider that when taking part in a program, educators feel overloaded by its (full) structures or by too many demands.³ So, the tension between fullness and emptiness happens when objects are crossing multiple boundaries (see Figures 4 and 5 below). I generally investigate these dynamics in a partnership program in poor areas, by simplifying these dynamics –for instance by focusing on the rather static aspect “revolving” a tension to keep my point simple and to provide an asset for my emerging model— and insisting on the resolution of fullness and emptiness.

Social Representation Dynamics in School-family Relationship: Application to a Partnership Program

The program aimed at supporting academic success was implemented in primary schools in poor areas (defined by income, the mother's level of schooling, and the parents' professional activity or inactivity) in Quebec (Canada) between 2002 and 2009. Teachers received instructions from political agents to develop activities to reach parents. The teachers defined these activities by means of group discussion with teachers and professionals from other institutions. In line with the research of Moscovici (1961), imagine Freud and a group of scientists exchanging ideas to develop some instruments to communicate their ideas to the population. The political agents designed an ecosystemic approach (structure) that they asked the educators to use. This approach defines parental engagement as a bidirectional interaction. For the purpose of my discussion, I refine my definition as the active movements of

³ I simplify here, but I can consider receiving too many objects as a case of both fullness overloading and emptiness. The point is that the surcharge of information or demands sustain (canalise) the tension between emptiness and fullness. Educators may feel that they don't know how to use these information, either because this information clashes with taboos or conventions (elliptic situation where educator's structure could not unload to reach for the object) or because the object makes no sense or does not fit these conventions. In the second case, educators will experience the object as empty. The key for understanding this tension is the contrast between structure and object.

parents interacting in a bidirectional manner (Boulanger, 2018) with actors from the school.

Educators have to canalise both the entrance of the ecosystemic *idea* (conveyed by the political agents when making social suggestions) and of the *concrete* parent in his or her universe, by loading and unloading certain zones (accepting or rejecting ideas and concrete parents in certain zones). Moreover, educators construct not only the object, but also its movement, that is, parental engagement as the movement of parents in school.

I carried out a thematic and discursive analysis (see Boulanger, 2016, for more details) of the teachers' discourse regarding the programs. I now present some illustrations (necessarily partial, selected for their usefulness for our ongoing theoretical development) of the application of the SRT in line with ellipsis and verbalism –considered in systemic terms— constructed by an active individual mediating the movement of the object amidst this object and the structure. I focus now on teacher.

In Figure 1, I insist on the general structure and object circulating between three worlds (multiple boundaries) and conveyed by the political sector, by the school, and by the family in the context of a partnership program.

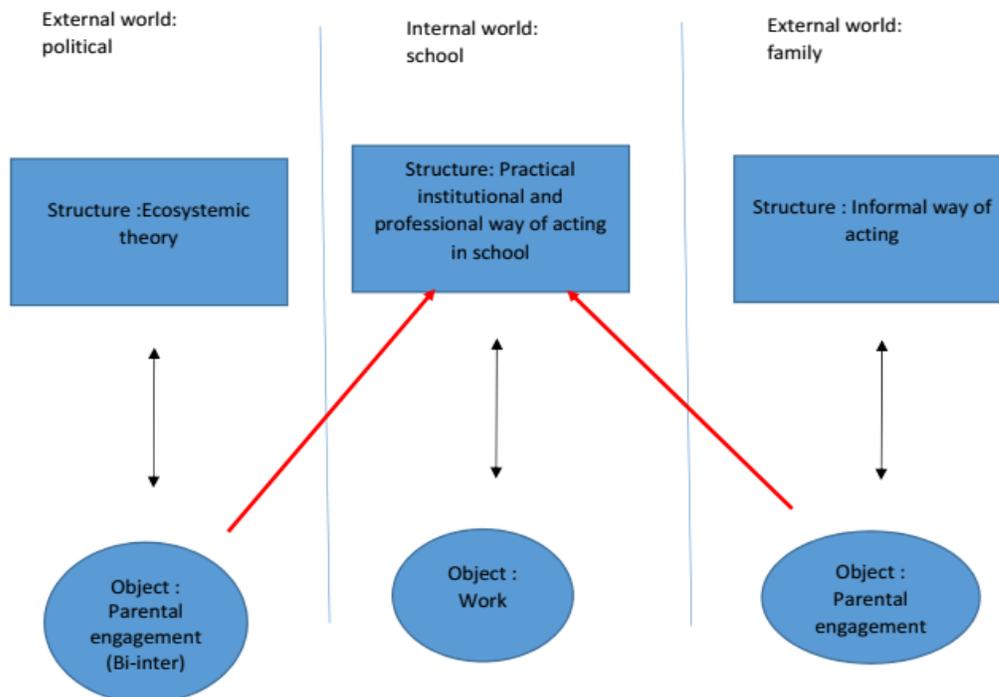


Figure 1. Construction of parental engagement as movement in a partnership program

Figure 1 symbolizes the ecosystemic theory conveyed by the political agents who designed it. With this approach, they promote the active engagement of parents who should become actors interacting in a bidirectional manner with teachers who are responsible for reaching them. As a strange and complex theory, a destabilizing one, that teachers have to understand and apply, the ecosystemic approach offers a new way of relating to parents. Its appropriation demands much effort and entails modifying one's usual way of acting.

Teachers' usual way of thinking is practical instead of theoretical; they refer to practical knowledge in order to represent reality (Blin, 1997), this is at the core of the professional development process. The ecosystemic theory appears too abstract for many teachers who claim to be overloaded by concepts.

The new theoretical conception of the environment as dynamic systems in interaction does not fit the usual practical way of acting. Teachers' usual framework (structure) as institutional and professional actors entails such a conception that action is oriented toward work (object). Meeting parents in an ecosystemic logic implies having informal relationships with strange actors; this contradicts teachers' usual way of acting as professionals using a more formal code of conduct. Thus the teachers are situated into a verbalist situation and to the emptiness nature of the object, because they did not possess the structural support to signify parental engagement (seen as an active and interactive object). *At the same time*, the teachers' practical framework could not be used to signify this object (ellipsis and fullness related to teachers not unloading the structure to make sense of the object). So, how do they act (acting that fits their usual way of relating to an object) to actively manage the object?

In Moscovici's study, the members of the population used the object of confession to make sense of the psychoanalyst-client relationship. In my scientific context, the teachers made sense of parental engagement through work. They modified their conception of this object (work) to include parental engagement as a new theme of work. When they spoke about work, it now included their investment to reach parents, typically saying "we *work* a lot *on* parents."⁴

This example shows that the subjects not only *are exposed to* a movement (circulation of ideas, information and demands) that is constrained (and guided) from the external world, but *actively* control it by constructing their relationship to the object's arrival (i.e., parent movement). While this example illustrates how the relationship with the object is modified, it also expresses the stability of the usual framework, that is, a superficial transformation largely remaining in the logic of the usual way of thinking and acting about parents. In fact, teachers generally mentioned investing themselves, but in an institutional and formal way. They generally insisted less on the

⁴ Teachers mentioned that while it was a lot of work, too much (demands experienced as full) in fact, they still invested themselves to reach parents. If parents were in a sense refused, it became a sign of work. In the same way, in Moscovici's study, while sexuality is refused by the population, it still became a sign of psychoanalysis.

opened it and they were the ones who decided to do so. Nevertheless, they could also close it. By extension, they accepted the presence of parents in some areas (formal meeting), but constructed them as absent⁵ (unloading certain zones⁶ or keeping them unloaded) in others, for instance in class. They rarely invited them into this important area. When they did, they positioned parents as present in certain roles and absent in others. In general, parents were used as technicians, but not for their competence, which was represented in a superficial and stereotypical way.

They thus *tried to* load certain zones with and unload other zones of parents (object), acting on the movement of the object. They did so, in accordance with their usual framework that was not significantly modified. The relationship between teachers and parents remained formal and grounded in professional ethos (the framework remained the same).

In this way, teachers managed the object's entrance into their world, positioning it as present and absent in specific zones. For example, when parents helped organize a festival, but did it as technicians (doing photocopies), they were *kept unfamiliar*, as teachers did not have to interact with them in the ecosystemic logic promoted by the program. I suggest that teachers making parent absent in some zones implies being closed to him or her, to the unfamiliar. It could be a way to actively maintain or *construct the unfamiliar*.

In some activities, teachers referred to school values (anchors) to convey (canalise) them to parents. The means (activities) they constructed as a team to reach parents were oriented around such values as anchors and academic knowledge as *object* that the parents must transmit to children. Thus, teachers, who are exposed to an empty object (parent) –which does not make sense regarding school conventions—load it with school values (structures). It implies resolving the tension engendered by verbalism. Teachers represent parent's environment (Figure 2) by means of fitting, by minor compromise regarding the ecosystemic approach (Figure 1) –which suggests a certain conception of this environment— by keeping with their own usual way of thinking and acting.

I now provide some complementary observations from the analysis of discourse. Teachers mention that being part of the program –as a cultural guide—helps them to realize that parents have a specific kind of language which is poor and oversimplified. They have to adapt their language by imitating parents' style. This does not imply being open to the unfamiliar in order to use parents' resources, it is quite the opposite. Effectively, this representation is associated with attributing low competency to parents. Masked under a comprehensive attitude, educators mention that poor

⁵ These empty zones are experienced as full, because the fact to refuse parents to entering it (unloading or refusing to load it) make sense regarding the usual conventions (structures).

⁶ For example, when refusing parents' expectation to play certain roles, teachers unloading or refuse to load certain zones. Those zones are constructed as empty. Hence, the signified (regarding school conventions) nature of emptiness. Here, emptiness is not (merely) resolved but actively constructed.

parents do not have the same competence as rich parents have. Educators say that for this very reason, they have to lower their expectations toward poor parents. These expectations explain why educators ask parents to be part of passive forms of engagement. This implies fixing characteristics to parents and their environment.

This attribution is grounded in fixing risk factors in child's and parent's environment. Under the cover of an apparent comprehensive attitude, educators mention that the program helps them understand that parents face many challenges in an at-risk environment (considered as being filled with risk factors). This discourse legitimates either lower expectations toward parents or compensatory intervention in the family. The risk factors, as well as occasionally the protective factors, in the parents' environment are strongly based on representations conveyed in a school setting. Indeed, all "*variables*" that are associated with school success are represented as protective factors and the "*variables*" that contribute to school failure are associated with risk *factors*. Thus, educators load certain zones with risk factors and other with protective factors and they create linkage –making some linkage dense and others sparse as mentioned before in relation to Bateson (1979)— between these "*variables*," generally in reference to linear causality, static and compensatory interaction between systems (the school counter-balanced the family). In a compensatory intervention, they load parents and child –considered as empty objects that are floating and waiting for school response—with school resources (constructed as protective factors), hence, educators filling empty children and parents –as empty objects—with respect to school conventions (structure).

Teachers not only guide the movement of the child and the parent in certain zones but they also act on the parent's own relationship with his or her environment by making certain aspects of their field of experience filled with school factors. But do parents need to receive instructions on how to support children's homework and how to manage their child's behavior at school or at home in the first place? Perhaps these zones –that are considered empty by educators— are already full from the point of view (representations) of the parents. This sheds light on the fact that parents' engagement is decontextualized (making invisible informal engagement and the dynamic construction of risk by child and parent), then re-contextualized statically (formal engagement and the reference to factors) around school conventions⁷ that provide guide to parents. Teachers do not grasp the dynamic aspects of a child's and parent's environment and represent the unfamiliar in a restrictive way, with respect to their own familiar environment. The very fact of referring to *factors* (risk or protective) implies this kind of decontextualization. Moreover, the community aspect is generally absent, hence, the limit of representing what is far and unfamiliar.

It should also be considered that teachers are themselves guided by the school and the political agents. On the first hand, I can consider that educators agree for a compromise: they reject the dynamic interaction between all aspects of a complex

⁷ Objectification happens when the object (parents) "fits" school conventions (structures), so when people resolve objectification by way of canalisation.

environment (idea conveyed by the ecosystemic approach of the program). On the other hand, this very approach is basically defined around a list of risk and protective *factors*. For this reason, not only the school but, also, the political agents convey “static representations” of the child’s and parent’s ecosystem and participate –by means of guidance—to educators’ representations.

CONCLUSION

Referring to SRT enables me to more deeply understand categorisation, by delving into the process of making the unfamiliar familiar. In particular, I tackle the tension between emptiness and fullness by highlighting the exclusive and contrasting construction of parents as *empty* with respect to teachers’ zones that are considered as full of sense, as anchors and norms used to signify parental engagement. Secondly, the analysis points out the way teachers keep the unfamiliar as such by actively constructing and signifying emptiness in reference to school conventions. Moscovici states that representing reality implies a constant tension between making the present absent and the absent present. I could expand it by tackling teachers’ signifying absence or making fully absent the empty absent.⁸ This would enable me to more *fully* highlight the constructive nature of people’s actions in the *tension* between emptiness and fullness. Instead of focusing on how teachers resolve a tension that is constantly reappearing, I could instead display the tension itself.

Another open avenue is objectification as a way to make the absent parent present *for the teachers*. This implies shedding light on how teachers substantialize engagement (process) by constructing it as a state (the involved parent). For Moscovici, making the absent present and objectifying it implies constructing the object or person as an entity in the physical or biological sense (the French population members conceive the unconscious as an organ *located somewhere*). But this does not entail making the other truly (materially) present in our environment and creating dialogue with him or her. I wonder if teachers’ representation functions as an alibi to not meeting parents or to interact with them in a monological way. Being open to the unfamiliar is a way to create dialogue. This dynamic aspect of Moscovici’s approach that is overlooked could be investigated more in-depth and complemented by an

⁸ Imagine a guy sitting in a chair in the cinema and waiting for his girlfriend. An empty chair beside him in the cinema is available to everyone (in general), yet this is not certain that the chair will remain available for his girlfriend. This zone is not filled with some marks to signify it. Putting his hat on the (still) empty chair (no one is sitting on it yet) or constantly looking at the chair to indicate that this is part of his space fills the empty chair with meaning. The same is true regarding the difference between, first, parent’ demanding to be part of the class activities –teachers feel the treat (tension engendered by emptiness) of the empty chair eventually being occupied by parents— and, second, teachers communicating to parent their expectation regarding parental engagement by indicating that parent is expected to be part of formal meeting but not the class. In the second case, the chair in the class room remain empty but signified and not posing any treat (resolving tension). But is it that simple? What about parent spontaneously presenting himself or herself in the classroom or entering the classroom after the class activities and sitting on a chair while speaking with teachers? Here, tension is a dynamic phenomenon.

analysis of parents and teachers engaging in dialogue to enable teachers to be open to parents' familiarity (his or her contextual and proximal anchor) and to create a zone of co-familiarity.

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