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Representation of the role assigned to families in educational matters by pre-service teachers

Representaciones del rol que los profesores en formación asignan a las familias en materia educativa

Héctor Cárcamo Vásquez¹

¹ Universidad del Bío-Bío. Chillán, Chile.

Abstract

This research aims to unveil the social representations that pre-service teachers shape regarding the parental educational role. The study takes place at a public university in the central-southern region of Chile. The methodological approach is qualitative, employing a single case study method. The participants are students enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor of Education in General Elementary Education program. Semi-structured individual interviews conducted in a single session are used for data production. The analysis is carried out using the structural-semantic technique. Findings indicate that the representation shaped by pre-service teachers regarding the parental educational role consists of an academic dimension and a personal dimension. Each of these dimensions is associated with markers of role fulfillment. For the academic dimension, the provision of materials and the fostering of study habits stand out, while for the personal dimension, emotional support, promotion of self-esteem, and student self-regulation are highlighted. Both dimensions configure the representation of the parental educational role about a central core modeled by the parental duty, with markers of fulfillment adjusted to the age of the child.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, parental role, social representations, academic dimension, personal dimension.

Resumen

El objetivo de la investigación es develar las representaciones sociales que el profesorado en formación modela respecto del rol parental educativo. El estudio se desarrolla en una universidad pública de la zona centro sur de Chile. El posicionamiento metodológico corresponde al cualitativo a través del método de estudio de casos único. Los sujetos son estudiantes que cursan el primer año de Pedagogía en Educación General Básica. Se utiliza la entrevista semiestructurada individual en única sesión. El análisis de los discursos se efectúa por medio de la técnica estructural semántica. Los hallazgos indican que la representación que modela el profesorado en formación respecto del rol parental educativo está constituida por una dimensión académica y una personal. A cada una de estas dimensiones se le asocian marcadores de cumplimiento del rol; para la dimensión académica, destacan la provisión de materiales y la generación de hábitos de estudio; para la dimensión personal, el soporte emocional, la promoción de la autoestima y la autorregulación de los estudiantes. Ambas dimensiones configuran la representación del rol parental educativo en relación a un núcleo central modelado por el deber hacer de padres y madres cuyo marcador de cumplimiento se ajusta a la edad del hijo o hija.

Palabras clave: Formación inicial docente, rol parental, representaciones sociales, dimensión académica, dimensión personal.

Correspondence: hcarmacamo@ubiobio.cl

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Introduction

The scientific literature highlights a broad consensus regarding the benefits derived from establishing a fluid relationship between both agents. Some of the reported benefits include improved academic performance among students, increased self-esteem in children and adolescents, greater participation of parents and guardians in general, and enhanced school governance, among others (Tristán et al., 2021; Cárcamo Vásquez & Garreta Bochaca, 2020; Ceballos & Sainz, 2019; Torrubia et al., 2017).

What has been presented underscores the relevance of addressing this topic, not only in the day-to-day functioning of schools but also in the initial teacher training process. In this regard, it is important to note that most studies related to the general topic of family-school relationships are conducted in school settings, while few focus on the contexts in which initial teacher training occurs (Cárcamo Vásquez & Garreta Bochaca, 2020; Cárcamo-Vásquez & Gubbins-Foxley, 2023). One of the contributions of the present study is precisely its focus on initial teacher training, as it seeks to uncover the social representations that prospective primary school teachers develop concerning the educational parental role.

Before referring to the educational parental role, it is necessary to outline certain basic and fundamental notions regarding status and role. *Status* corresponds to the social position individuals occupy within a given social structure; *role*, in turn, corresponds to the set of behaviors expected of individuals according to the status they hold. More specifically, a role consists of patterns of behavior associated with a particular status (Almaraz et al., 1996). Put differently, roles can be understood as the set of culturally given duties, obligations, and expectations that accompany any status within a social context. Every social context contains cultural norms that guide individuals' behavior according to the status they occupy. This is understood as *role expectation* (Gilbert, 2010; Almaraz et al., 1996).

People occupy different statuses and perform various roles—indeed, there are more roles than statuses, since each status presupposes several roles aligned with the position occupied within the social structure

(Alexander, 1989). Consequently, the concept of *role sets* emerges. Another aspect to consider in the analysis of roles is that, because individuals often occupy multiple statuses, the roles associated with one status may at times be incompatible with those of another, producing *role conflict*.

Focusing on the object of study of this work, parents occupy the status of adults responsible for the care and protection of children and adolescents, and thus must perform a wide range of roles. For example, prior studies by Cárcamo-Vásquez & Rodríguez-Garcés (2015) highlight tensions between the role of parents as providers and parents as guardians. Schools expect parents to attend parent-teacher meetings and individual conferences when requested by teachers, but work-related responsibilities may prevent them from doing so. This situation reveals that the educational parental role can be situated in two particular dimensions: *within the school* and *outside the school*. From the intramural dimension, the educational parental role is shaped and expressed within the school context, across various instances and moments. From the extramural dimension, the educational parental role is shaped and expressed in the home environment, outside the school, usually by promoting and reinforcing dispositions that facilitate the child's adjustment to the academic norms of the school environment (Bourdieu, 2001; Lahire, 2004).

Based on what has been presented and as indicated earlier, this study focuses on the educational parental role, understood as the set of duties and obligations that families—particularly mothers and fathers—carry out in relation to their children's schooling processes. This role comprises three dimensions. The first is the *academic dimension*, which includes actions such as supporting the completion of school tasks at home (Azar et al., 2023; Bernal-Ruiz et al., 2020). The second is the *value-attitudinal dimension*, expressed through instilling values such as respect and responsibility, as well as attitudes aligned with the school context, such as order and discipline (Bazin Vargas & Cárcamo Vásquez, 2023). Finally, the *emotional dimension* involves strengthening children's and adolescents' self-esteem and self-regulation (López-Angulo et al., 2023; Sanmartín Ureña & Tapia Peralta, 2023).

Why use Social Representations Theory?

Social Representations Theory, whose main proponent is Moscovici, posits that representations are discursive structures through which individuals make sense of the world in which they operate (Moscovici, 1979). A representation is therefore “a functional vision of the world that allows the individual or group to assign meaning to their behaviors and to understand reality through their own system of references, thereby adapting and defining a place for themselves” (Abric, 2001, p. 13).

Social representations are “an essential element in understanding the determinants of behaviors and social practices” (Abric, 2001, p. 18). Assuming that representations correspond to properties of practical thought that orient individuals’ daily lives—such as beliefs and attitudes—it is possible to argue that representations shape the differentiated ways in which individuals act toward various objects of attention. In the specific case of this study, the object of attention corresponds to the role that future primary school teachers assign to families in educational matters.

Following the development of this theory, two dominant perspectives can be identified. On the one hand, the *structural perspective* pays particular attention to the contents that shape the representation, the sources from which these contents emerge, and the agents involved in the circulation of information and knowledge related to them. On the other, the *processual perspective* emphasizes the characteristics and forms through which a representation becomes established (Araya, 2002; Rodríguez, 2007).

In this study, the structural perspective is adopted; thus, the focus is placed particularly on the contents that shape the representation future primary teachers develop regarding the role families should play in educational matters. What do the contents of a representation refer to from a structural standpoint? They refer to the discursive elements articulated by individuals, which allow access to the configuring elements of the representation. This is precisely why identifying them is so important: these contents reveal the meaning structures that give form to the

representation and shape the ways individuals grasp the objects represented—in this case, the educational parental role (Cárcamo-Vásquez & Méndez-Bustos, 2024).

Why is it important to address this topic through Social Representations Theory?

A representation “is a guide for action; it orients actions and social relations” (Abric, 2001, p. 13). Consequently, understanding this phenomenon may help identify potential modes of action that teachers will adopt toward families once they enter the school system, given that a representation “is a system for precoding reality, for it determines a set of anticipations and expectations” (Abric, 2001, p. 13).

Adopting this theory as the interpretive framework is important because it allows, first, access to the social knowledge that teachers in training possess and upon which they base their actions; second, it provides insight into their potential modes of action once they begin their teaching careers; and finally, it makes it possible to identify the content shaping these representations within the context of initial teacher training, thereby opening pathways for problematizing the phenomenon in university settings with the aim of providing resources that will guide their actions as teachers in schools.

Methodology

The research is developed within the interpretive-comprehensive paradigm. For this reason, the methodology employed is qualitative, as the study seeks to investigate the phenomenon from the perspective of the subjects involved (Beltrán, 2018). Specifically, the emphasis is placed on exploring the representations that prospective primary school teachers hold regarding the role that families should play in educational matters. The method used corresponds to an intrinsic single-case study (Simons, 2011; Coller, 2005).

The case studied corresponds to a public university located in south-central Chile, specifically its Primary Education Teacher Training Program, and more precisely, the cohort admitted in 2021. This institution is the only public and state university within the regions of Ñuble and Bío-Bío. It is worth noting,

however, that students enrolled in the Primary Education Teacher Training Program come predominantly from the Ñuble region and, to a lesser extent, from the Maule and Bío-Bío regions. Unlike the programs offered by other universities within the area of influence, this teacher-training program is generalist in nature and places particular emphasis on rural education. Consequently, students engage in practicum experiences in both rural and urban schools, which facilitates their understanding of the phenomenon under study from a territorially situated perspective. Another relevant aspect of this particular cohort is that, due to the pandemic, students admitted in 2021 completed their first and second semesters entirely online.

Regarding the subjects, it is necessary to point out that they are first-semester students enrolled in the Primary Education Teacher Training Program at the university that constitutes the case study. This group participated in a broader research project aimed at evaluating the implementation of a teaching–learning strategy for the comprehensive analysis of family–school relationships. The findings presented here refer specifically to the representational content that students develop concerning the educational parental role they attribute to families. The 2021 cohort is composed of 59 students, of whom 48 are women and 11 are men. A total of 12 women (25% of all female students) and 5 men (45% of all male students) participated in the study. Combined, the sample represents 28% of the 2021 cohort.

Access to participants occurred virtually, during the General Sociology course in the first semester of the curriculum. There, an overview of the research project was presented and an open invitation extended. Students were given one week to respond. Once participation was confirmed, virtual meeting spaces and schedules were arranged.

The data production technique employed was the individual semi-structured interview, which is widely recognized as an appropriate technique for accessing the representational content held by a particular group (Kvale, 2011; Martinic, 2006). The research instrument was an interview guide designed to elicit discourse about the elements constituting the

educational parental role. The instrument was validated through expert review: one expert in the subject matter and one expert in qualitative methodologies were asked to review it. After incorporating their feedback, the instrument underwent a second round of validation by a subject-matter expert (Flick, 2015). All observations and suggestions were integrated into the final version.

Interviews were conducted virtually due to the pandemic and the corresponding health restrictions imposed by the authorities. Interview times were arranged with participants in advance, and the informed consent protocol was activated. The interviews lasted between 27 and 59 minutes. All participants agreed to have their interviews recorded using the Google Meet platform.

Regarding data analysis, a structural semantic analysis technique was applied. The following steps were carried out: first, the verbal material was transcribed and transformed into written text. An open reading was then conducted to validate the transcription, ensuring consistency between the spoken and written word (Gibbs, 2012). Third, the material was coded according to deductive categories and subcategories. Fourth, a matrix was constructed to support methodological reduction, organizing the material vertically (interview by interview) and subsequently horizontally, integrating the individually coded fragments to identify convergences and divergences among participants' discourse. Fifth, axes of meaning were identified along with their respective disjunctive codes, which facilitated graphical modeling of the analysis through semantic structures. Finally, axial connections were established to reveal the semantic fields within which the group's discourse operates. For reporting purposes: explicit disjunctive codes are presented textually, condensed codes are shown in parentheses, and hypothetical codes are presented in quotation marks.

With respect to the ethical considerations of the research process, all protocols required by the Research and Artistic Creation Directorate of the author's university were activated. For contacting participants, an informed consent letter was prepared following standards recommended by the international

scientific community (Flick, 2014). Lastly, to protect the identity of participants, names were replaced with the following nomenclature: informant, sequential number, and gender.

Results and Discussion

As indicated in the preceding pages, the contents of a representation may be understood as the discursive elements articulated by individuals, whose expression enables access to the identification of the components that constitute a representation. In the specific case of this study, this section focuses particularly on those statements within the discursive corpus that make it possible to recognize how prospective teachers construct their representation of the educational parental role.

Duty to Act

A first aspect that emerges from the participants' discourse highlights the *duty to act* (*deber hacer*) as the principal element of meaning (Figure 1). This axis of meaning reflects the predominance of a classical functionalist perspective regarding the concept of role. From this theoretical standpoint, a role represents the set of expected behaviors assigned to individuals within institutionalized contexts (Alexander, 1989). Thus, it is projected as an axis of meaning grounded in the set of expectations associated with that role (Gilbert, 2010; Almaraz et al., 1996). Little to no reference is made to the shaping of the role through processes of social interaction mediated by the formal school environment.

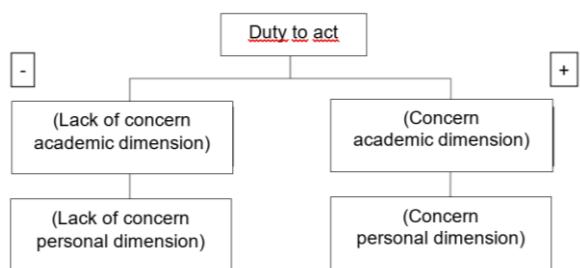


Figure 1. Axis of meaning: the duty to act. Parallel semantic structure.

The duty to act referred to as an axis of meaning is expressed in two clearly distinguishable dimensions: on the one hand, the academic dimension (Figure 2), and on the other, the personal dimension (Figure 3).

In both dimensions, mothers and fathers are expected to focus on meeting the needs of children and adolescents.

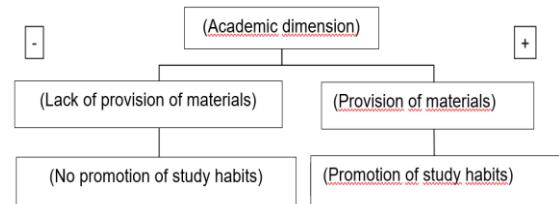


Figure 2. Axis of meaning: academic dimension. Parallel semantic structure.

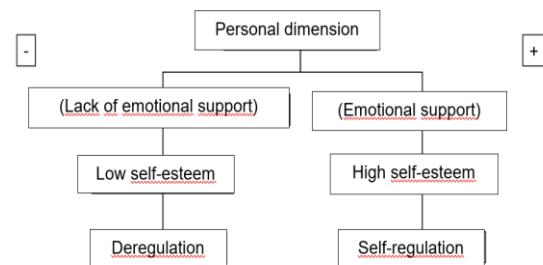


Figure 3. Signification axis – personal dimension. Parallel semantic structure.

Academic Dimension

In the academic dimension, those aspects are recorded that, according to the trainee teachers, contribute to what they consider appropriate academic performance. In this regard, a first element perceived as constitutive of this dimension refers to material provision, as can be seen in the following interview excerpt:

"It is important to pay attention. For example, if they need a material, they should have it, even if it is not exactly the same; at least it should be similar."
(Informant 12, female)

Based on the fragment above, it is possible to recognize an indicator of parental role fulfillment in this dimension, which is located in the material plane, coinciding with what Cárcamo-Vásquez & Rodríguez-Garcés (2015) reported. Thus, when parents ensure that the child or adolescent has the school supplies and other items required from the school context, the subjects recognize the fulfillment of the role. It is worth

noting that, in the overall discourse corpus, this situation is positively valued by the participants as it represents a clear marker that allows the parental commitment to the schooling process to be distinguished through support in learning according to the demands of the school environment (Azar, et al., 2023). To illustrate this, the following interview fragment is presented:

"In my class, I saw classmates who used a single notebook for all subjects; where is the concern from their parents?" (Informant 16, female)

Although a discursive regularity is recognized that positions material provision as an indicator of role fulfillment by parents, nuances within the corpus can be observed, as expressed in the following fragment:

"Checking if the child comes with their materials or not, although sometimes the child does not tell their parents things, but when they are little, you have to pay attention; later, as we grow, we get a bit lazier." (Informant 4, female)

In the previous fragment, while a nuance is highlighted, it still emphasizes the importance of material provision as the main marker of educational parental role fulfillment. What it evidences is rather the need to recognize that the educational parental role can adjust according to the child's age. The younger the child, the greater the supervision; in the informant's words, "*to pay attention*". In this sense, for younger children, the role assigned to parents is characterized by the active involvement they must assume, which decreases as the child grows.

Another aspect to highlight within the academic dimension is that it not only refers to providing materials for activities inside and outside the school but also includes support for academic activities from home (Bernal-Ruiz, et al., 2020). In this case, the indicator of role fulfillment is observed in the school context, as the child's adjustment to the school's academic standards is valued (Bourdieu, 2001). Two aspects stand out here. On one hand, the reinforcement of learning introduced in the school space through the teacher's pedagogical action,

expressed—according to the discourses—through the completion of homework done at home, as the following fragment shows:

"The first thing you notice in a child is when they come with their homework done, when someone helped them at home to do it." (Informant 1, female)

On the other hand, the promotion of study habits that result in better academic outcomes. In this regard, the following fragment represents a clear example:

"It is important to reinforce what is seen in class, to review the things children do at school when they get home." (Informant 9, female)

Or this other fragment, which emphasizes the need to support the establishment of habits from home:

"That the father is with the child, that the mother is present, helping them learn, learning together, that is very important." (Informant 12, female)

Personal Dimension

The personal dimension comprises elements related to emotional and attitudinal aspects. In this regard, Informant 17 states:

"I would expect parents to make their child aware; having trust between a parent and child is super important in the relationship. Thinking about tests or things like that, instead of scolding them, they should support them, because not all children have the same abilities, and that helps them gain more confidence." (Informant 17, female)

Given the characteristics of this dimension, the indicator of role fulfillment differs from the academic dimension. The emphasis is on the emotional plane. Thus, generating bonds of trust that strengthen self-esteem and promoting self-regulation in children and adolescents is central to fulfilling the educational parental role, as exposed by López-Angulo (2023). This support and accompaniment are positively valued by the interviewees because they are understood as resources to foster a proper disposition

for learning, as illustrated in the following interview fragment:

"Understanding children's feelings is very important; often they are not considered because they are children, which generates frustration. I believe that when they are children is when they need the most attention so they don't get frustrated. Because if a child is frustrated, what will they learn?" (Informant 7, male)

It can be recognized that the value assigned by participants to the personal dimension is especially meaningful when it is understood that through it, the possibilities of improving the child's or adolescent's performance increase. This improved performance affects both individual and collective levels, reflected in a classroom climate that favors the teaching and learning process. This increased possibility of better performance is understood as a consequence of the link between emotional support and interest in the schooling process, enhancing the overall experience (Ceballos & Sainz, 2019). As an example, consider the following fragment:

"Parents need to care about the children because when the child has family support, they will be interested in doing school activities, trying, doing them well, and if this happens for every child, the classroom work goes much better." (Informant 4, female)

Considerations on the Expression of Educational Parental Role Fulfillment

The parental role depends on the child's age

In the analyzed discourses, both dimensions are mediated by the level of autonomy reached according to the child's stage of life. According to the discourse, the presence of parents is recognized as a marker of role fulfillment, although an inversely proportional relationship is revealed between the child's age and parental presence, especially in the school environment (Cárcamo Vásquez & Garreta Bochaca, 2020). An example is provided by one interviewee:

"It depends on the age. Let me explain, when they are small, you have to guide

them, pay attention, guide them in a certain way, but later, when they grow, seventh, eighth grade, they are almost at the middle school level, so you have to give them a bit more freedom." (Informant 3, female)

Consequently, presence, as an indicator of educational parental role fulfillment, is evaluated based on what participants consider necessary for each stage of the child's development. Thus, parents of children in the first cycle of basic education must be present both in formal school settings (parent meetings, interviews, commemorative events, etc.) and at home, to stay informed of school requirements (expressed in written form), support the learning process initiated at school (doing homework at home), and instill study habits (Cárcamo-Vásquez & Gubbins-Foxley, 2023).

"Parents have to see school as the child's second home, so when they are just starting, in first or second grade, they must always be there, come to school, attend events, help with homework, all of that is important for the child." (Informant 9, female)

As children grow and advance to higher grades—precursors to secondary education—the interviewees maintain that parents should not neglect their role, but their involvement should create spaces for greater autonomy, allowing adolescents to responsibly face the schooling process while adjusting to academic norms as noted by Bourdieu (2001) and Lahire (2004).

Obstacle to fulfilling the educational parental role

Finally, the discourses identify a key obstacle to adequately fulfilling the educational parental role: the working hours assumed by parents in the current context (Cárcamo-Vásquez & Méndez-Bustos, 2024). The corpus shows a regular pattern regarding the effect of parents' long work hours on both dimensions.

Firstly, the academic dimension, expressed through material provision, is affected by failure to meet specific school demands (e.g., materials for school activities) and especially by absence during school events (interviews, parent meetings, extracurricular

activities); this highlights the role conflict described by Alexander (1989), Almaraz, et al. (1996), and Gilbert (2010). Informant 7 remarks:

"It is important that at least one family member makes the child feel supported, brings the things the teacher asks for, comes to meetings, participates with them. Adults spend a lot of time working, but I still think a way can be found for a family member to accompany the child."

(Informant 7, male)

The personal dimension, expressed through the emotional indicator, is also hindered by work demands. For example:

"I think work affects some families; they work a lot and only see the affective side at night, and some not even that."

(Informant 13, male)

After analyzing the corpus, the constitutive contents of the educational parental role were recognized. In this sense, it can be stated that the representation of the educational parental role constructed by the interviewees moves between two semantic fields (Figure 4). These semantic fields derive from the intersection of the signification axes modeled by the academic and personal dimensions described in the results section. The first semantic field corresponds to the high value (++) assigned to the concern that parents should show regarding academic aspects (material provision and promotion of habits). The second semantic field, emerging from the set of discourses, presents a nuance: although academic aspects are relevant, they may not always be fully present, as long as the personal dimension, expressed through emotional support, strengthening of self-esteem, and self-regulation, is preserved (+-).

Another aspect to highlight concerns the way in which the contents that shape the representation of the educational parental role, as formed by the interviewees, are organized. In this way, the "should-do" is evidenced as the central core, with the academic and personal dimensions functioning as peripheral elements (Abric, 2001). It is worth noting that a difference can be observed between the two in

terms of their proximity to the central core (Figure 5). While both are considered relevant for understanding the educational parental role, it is the personal dimension that gains greater prominence, as it contributes to the adjustment of children and adolescents to the schooling process.

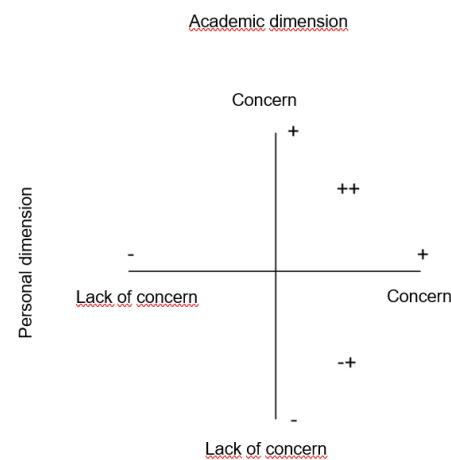


Figure 4. Axial intersection. Axes: Academic dimension – Personal dimension.

Finally, the educational parental role, configured by the academic-personal bidimensionality, is decoded at a practical level by trainee teachers according to its expression of fulfillment. In this regard, role fulfillment is expressed differently depending on the child's or adolescent's age. Accordingly, an inversely proportional presence and involvement is assumed: that is, greater closeness, proximity, and presence for children who are beginning the schooling process; maintaining closeness to the school, stepping back from daily routines, and fostering greater autonomy when adolescents are concerned.

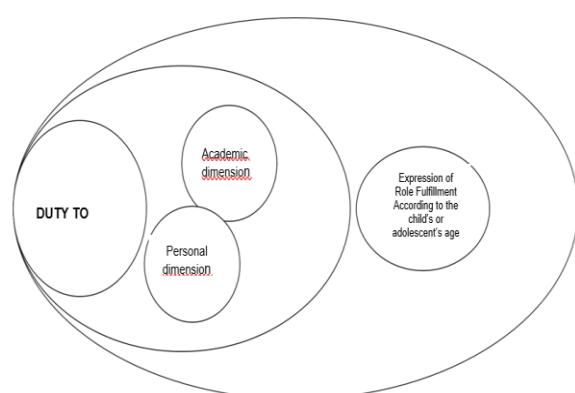


Figure 5. Central Core and Peripheral Elements of the Representation of the Educational Parental Role.

The interviewed teachers emphasize the importance of proper fulfillment of the educational parental role; however, they also identify structural macro-level constraints that hinder its concrete expression, such as the extended working hours that parents must fulfill.

The study presented, while contributing to the understanding of the educational parental role, has as its main limitation the data collection process. The interviews were conducted online due to the confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation made it difficult to carry out more than one session in cases where it would have been necessary. For example, it was not possible to explore in depth certain aspects of interest, such as the identification of obstacles to the proper exercise of the educational parental role. Another limitation concerns the use of a single technique for data collection, a situation that could be addressed in future research; for instance, when working with trainee teachers, using group-based data collection methods, such as focus groups, could provide richer information. Likewise, a longitudinal design would facilitate understanding the influence of the initial teacher training process on the way subjects represent the educational parental role.

Undoubtedly, this limitation opens avenues for further research. Having identified the configurative elements of the educational parental role, it becomes necessary to continue investigating the aspects recognized as obstacles, since such knowledge could contribute to a deeper problematization of this topic by trainee teachers, integrating both macro- and micro-level analysis. Furthermore, new research could make both theoretical and methodological contributions to recognizing the multidimensionality that shapes this phenomenon in the context of initial teacher education.

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