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## Making the unfamiliar familiar: social Representations of Teachers about Parental Engagement in an Intervention Program in Quebec

Dany Boulanger <sup>1</sup>, François Larose <sup>1</sup>, Naomi Grenier <sup>1</sup>, Frédéric Saussez <sup>1</sup>, Yves Couturier <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Université de Sherbrooke, 2500 Boulevard de l'Université, Sherbrooke J1K 2R1, Canada

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### Abstract

This article seeks to identify the social representations (SR) of parental engagement (PE) among teachers participating in a partnership program implemented between 2002 and 2009 in 24 primary schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in Quebec, Canada. We focus on the content analysis of follow-up interviews carried out among teachers (n=32) in 2008 and the content analysis of the partnership plans (n=124) produced between 2003 and 2009. Our analysis enabled us not only to identify and describe the RS of the PE from a structural point of view, but they also reveal some of the dynamics pertaining to the SR.

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### 1. Introduction

If, in a socio-historical perspective, parents and teachers are often unfamiliar to each other (Waller, 1932/1961; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978), the gap between the school and the family nowadays tends to persist and even increase and the relationships are likely to deteriorate (Pace & Hemmings, 2007; Daniel, 2011). In order to address this issue, this paper analyses the social representations of parental engagement among teachers participating in a partnership program implemented in Quebec (Canada). After putting forward the purpose and relevance of this study on social representations, we will describe the partnership program under evaluation. Subsequently, we will present the conceptual framework that is composed of the following concepts: social representation and parental engagement. Then, we will identify the methodological dimensions of this study, after which we will divide the presentation of the results in two sections: the first devoted to the analysis of discourse and the second focusing on the analysis of partnership plans produced within the context of the program. We will conclude briefly by interpreting the results and suggesting two lines of research.

### 2. Background

The thesis developed by Waller in 1932 that parents and teachers are eternal strangers in cultural conflict is the basis of building the field of school-family-community partnership (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978; Epstein, 1987). Different sociological work, located in the extension of the perspective of social reproduction (Grignon and

Corresponding author: Dany Boulanger Tel : 366739333

E-mail: [Dany.Boulanger@usherbrooke.ca](mailto:Dany.Boulanger@usherbrooke.ca)

Passeron, 1989), reaffirm the existence of cultural differences and a hierarchical relationship between the parents of lower social class and middle-class teachers (Delay, 2011; Lareau & Munoz, 2012). The culture (symbolic universe; Grignon and Passeron, 1989) of lower social class families is unfamiliar to teachers. In the neoliberal orientation of education, the political and institutional *discourses* convey *polarized* pictures of parents (bad or good) and *contradictory* messages about parental engagement regarded as both a resource and an obstacle to the success of the child (Atkinson, 1999). On the socio-cognitive level, the authors tend to associate these discourses with negative *attitudes* of teachers with regards to the engagement of lower social class parents (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). The partnership plans, and the parent-teacher contracts are institutional instruments used to normalize parents from lower social class according to school *expectations* (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). Knowledge therefore travels unilaterally from the school to the families; parents need to follow the school calendar (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). As mechanisms of school management, partnership plans are managed in an “input-output paradigm”, that is to say in a “wall-in perspective” in which schools, considered as a closed system, ensure their internal balance and manage threats from the outside, particularly the culture of lower social class families (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Wrigley, 2004). This “reductionist” logic, encountered at the foundation of the theory of Waller (1932/1961), seems to get updated, in some respects, through very different socio-political conditions (Auberbach, 2007; Pace & Hemmings 2007). The partnership programs, based on partnership plans, therefore tend to be located in a compensatory perspective (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

However, some innovative intervention programs aim at creating conditions for reconciliation between parents from EDSC and teachers as they constitute spaces for social negotiation, for the construction of discourse and for the production of common sense knowledge (Boulanger, Larose, & Couturier, 2010; Fernandez, 2010). These programs are traversed by two movements that come into tension: a top-down and hierarchical logic, where the knowledge carried by teachers and added (additivity) to the families’ knowledge, and a horizontal or bottom-up approach where such knowledge are negotiated and co-constructed (Fleer Williams-Kennedy, 2001; Boulanger *et al.*, 2011). Teachers who are located into this dialectical space face an unfamiliar world and they are confronted with parents who are “strangers” to them. Consequently, they construct social representations which correspond to a socio-cognitive and a socio-discursive mechanism of mediation between two worlds, a process by which an individual makes familiar what is unfamiliar when faced with a strange situation (Moscovici, 1984, 2000). Few authors have studied the relationships between school and family in terms of social representations, particularly in Moscovici’s perspective (Pelt and Poncelet, 2012). In the field of school-family-community partnership, the Anglo-Saxon literature is based most often on the concepts of discourse and attitude and rarely on the concept of social representation (Boulanger, Larose, & Couturier, 2010).

This paper aims at filling this gap by soliciting this concept. It is based on the evaluation of the *Famille, école, communauté, réussir ensemble* (FECRE) program, implemented in Quebec (Canada), between 2002 and 2009, in 24 primary schools located in EDSC. This program targeted children at risk of school failure and aged from 2 to 12 and their parents. It also aimed at sensitizing teachers to the importance of parental engagement by encouraging them to adapt their practices to the sociodemographic characteristics of parents. In order to achieve these goals, a learning community (networks of family and non-family professionals) was experimented which represented a space facilitating negotiation between different actors and the generation of knowledge. This learning community was created around partnership plans, which can be described as devices that are collectively constructed, in an horizontal manner, in a team located in the community and composed of professionals from school and other organisations of the community.

In this paper, we seek to answer the following research question: What are the social representations of parental engagement of teachers participating in FECRE?

### 3. Theoretical Framework

To adress our research question, we use the concept of parental engagement defined as “a set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances, and events that are produced and bounded by the context in which that engagement takes place” (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis and George, 2004, p. 6). The mentioned actions mediate the relationship between the actors and are themselves mediated by devices (ex. partnership plans). In addition, these actions depend on the meaning given to them by actors.

Our theoretical framework is also based on the concept of social representation defined as a social entity's common sense knowledge (social class, group, community) whose purpose is to make something unfamiliar familiar (Moscovici, 1961/1976, 1984). In continuity with the work of this author, Abric (1993, 1996) argues that social representation is formed of central elements that refer to consensual and non-negotiable objects. As such, they are associated with “notional framework” (Moliner & Martos, 2005) or thema (Moscovici, 2000). They “serve as organizing principle and meaning generators” (Moliner, 1995, p. 27) and order different units of meaning by assigning them meaning.

For Abric, social representation is also composed of peripheral elements that are organized according to central elements, but also allow their adaptation to changing contexts. They also permit to tolerate the tension generated by the presence of heterogeneous units and practices that contradict the central elements. For example, faced with threats, the peripheral elements put in motion strange patterns, that is to say, they create a "category of exception" through a four-step process: “recalling of the normal; designation of the foreign element; affirmation of a contradiction between the two terms, proposition of a rationalization helping to bear the contradiction” (Abric, 1993, p. 78). In his two-dimensional model, Moliner (1995) considers the distinction between central and peripheral elements while incorporating a second dimension: the descriptive and evaluative function fulfilled by the social representation.

COGNITION		
	Central	Peripheral
Descriptive pole	<i>Field of DEFINITIONS</i> Characteristics defining all objects processed through the representations (e.g. Hierarchy)	<i>Field of DESCRIPTIONS</i> Object's most frequent and most probable characteristics. (e.g. Research and Creation)
Evaluative pole	<i>Field of NORMS</i> Criteria for evaluating the object (e.g. Profit)	Field of EXPECTATIONS Desired characteristics of the object (e.g. Personal Fulfillment).

Figure 1. Two-dimensional model of social representations\*

The field of definition is based on a systematic link between the object and its characteristics, which occurs *always* or *necessarily*. It is non-negotiable. The field of norms involves an assessment in terms of what is *good* or *bad*, *right* or *wrong*. The field of description reflects a *frequent* link between the object and its characteristic that happens *sometimes*. The field of expectations refers to what is *desirable* or *undesirable*, to what the person *should* do.

### 4. Methodology

We present the results of a second-order analysis of data gathered as part of the FECRE evaluation, carried out between 2007 and 2010. For the purpose of this longitudinal research, which was aligned with realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and theory-driven outcome evaluation (Chen, 2005), we used a mixed methodology to

\* Moliner (1995), p. 38.

ensure, through triangulation, the convergence and the complementarity of sources, of methods and of items retrieved from the various data gatherings and from the instruments of analysis (Howe, 2012). In this study, we focus on the content analysis of follow-up interviews carried out among teachers (n=32) in 2008 and the content analysis of the documentary data regarding partnership plans (n=124) produced between 2003 and 2009. Such tools, which serve to support the collective memory and to materialise discourses, may also be signs of representations. For the secondary treatment of the discourse, which pertains to partnership plans<sup>†</sup>, we selected two interview questions. First, we asked the teachers if intervening in a FECRE school affected their relationship with the parent, then we asked if they thought that partnership plans had effects on parental engagement. These questions targeted the opinions of teachers in relation to parental engagement, which is shaped in the context of FECRE and within their practices (partnership plans). Our analysis aims at identifying diverse opinions through a structural perspective.

Subsequently, we have conducted a textual data analysis (Lebart, Salem, & Berry, 1998) on written materials (partnership plans) and on interview transcripts. Through this approach, which uses correspondence factor analysis (CFA) on a body of discourses, a certain number of forms (words) or segments (concepts) characterize the discourse of a number of social entities. These discursive elements, as they pertain to operators reflect the more or less off-centered position of specific activities in relation to the centre of the factorial plan. The factorial design can therefore be read through its interpretative meaning as a geographical metaphor of structural relations between the different components of discourse since the centration or the eccentricity of its components reflects the belonging of structural elements. Central elements are equivalent to ordinary (folk) discourse because the peripheral components, prescriptive or normative, mark the eccentricity of the distribution of conceptual units (Larose, Audette, & Roy, 1997).

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Discourse Analysis

Through our discourse analysis, we were able to underscore the content associated with the four representational fields (Figure 1) identified by Moliner (1995). After briefly presenting them, we will focus on areas of tension involving the field of expectations of peripheral elements. Thus, we not only will analyse representational structures, but also certain socio-cognitive “dynamics”. Moreover, following the model of Moliner (1995), we will report transverse tendencies. For lack of space, we will not systematically identify the characteristics (e.g. frequency or evaluation indexes) of the objects represented nor will we put forward their occurrence in the discourse.

The field of norms (central elements) reveals transverse topics (notional framework): parental engagement, the parent-teacher relationship, parental attitudes, the milieu as a culture-of-poverty and the intervention with the child. The last two topics will be discussed when we will tackle the areas of tension. The field descriptions, indicating what is variable, refers to the presence or absence of the parent in school and the nature of his engagement. These peripheral elements are systematically associated with central elements, which put them in perspective.

Parental engagement is generally considered *positive*. It is apprehended *negatively* when it concerns help with homework, which is *infrequent*. Since the parents are *more* present in the context of activities or projects, meetings and, sometimes, general gatherings, these forms of engagement are considered *positive*. The valence of the attitude thus depends on parental presence and of the type of their investment. Teachers often state that parents *never* attend committees. This is where the field of descriptions intervenes. The parent-teacher relationship, which is *positively* connoted, also depends on parental presence in school. Parental attitudes are generally seen in a *positive* light.

As for the “dynamics”, we identified three sets of antinomies which correspond to polarities of different factorial design axes of the textual data analysis. It is therefore related to the structuring dimensions of discourse. Teachers

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<sup>†</sup> The reader who wishes to deepen his or her understanding of partnership plans in FECRE can refer to Boulanger et al. (2011).

consider seeking the parents’ engagement, recruiting them and bringing them to school as *desirable* goals (field of expectations). They mention deploying considerable efforts in this direction, but without observing effects that meet their expectations. Although parents are engaged academically and demonstrate positive attitudes, they do not respond adequately to the teachers’ requests. Teachers explain that parents are hard-to-reach (field of norms). They also emit a series of negative judgments on this subject. We notice that a peripheral element (the desire to encourage parental engagement) makes sense in the light of this central element. Teachers refer to a second central element to make sense of the gap between their "expectations" (field of expectations) and reality: the culture-of-poverty. The fact that these parents come from EDSC is frequently accompanied by negatively connoted attributions, such as being hard-to-reach.

A second dynamic helps to explain the gap between the poor motivation of parents from EDSC (field of norms) and teachers’ *willingness* to seek parental engagement (field of expectations); teachers often refer to the parents’ low skill level. According to this reasoning, it is not because the parents do not want to commit that they do not get engaged, but because they are incompetent. This incompetence is a feature of the culture-of-poverty. Teachers then develop a strange pattern (Abric, 1993) to manage the tension generated by the contradiction that we have identified. In addition, this reasoning is associated with another expectation (field of expectations): "taking the parents as they are, accept them without asking too much." In appearance, they adopt a comprehensive point of view in relation to the parent. However, their reasoning is based on a fixed perspective of the culture-of-poverty, an invalidation of parenting skills. Moreover, it leads to a decrease in expectations for parental engagement. In terms of expectations, we can mention, for example, that parental engagement in the design of partnership plans is considered *undesirable*.

The third dynamic manifests itself through the recognition of the students’ needs (field of expectations) to make parents allies since it is the ultimate condition of the academic success of the child. Even if parents have a *negative* approach and can be *disturbing* (field of norms), it appears *necessary* to associate them for strategic purposes because the quality of the teachers’ interventions with children depends on the parents. Parents are therefore “instrumentalized”, considered as necessary allies. This reasoning is associated with low expectations, defined in terms of the support of school agenda by the parent.

5.2. Partnership Plans Analysis

Overall, our analysis of partnership plans both confirms and complements the analysis of discourse. We analyzed all means in order to target those related to parental engagement. The results are presented in the following table.

	2005-2007	2007-2009
Activities Associated with Partnership Plans	-Student-centered. -Traditional strategies for attracting parents (solicitation). -Parental engagement through workshops (skills). -Relationships begin to appear.	-Diversification of strategies to attract parents and find ways for them to get engaged. -School-family relationship mediation (e.g. the child, the community, the newspaper). -Stakeholders networking and coming together.
Activities Associated with Parental Engagement	-General strategy for attracting parents to school activities. -Support workshops (skills). -Some teacher initiatives.	-Personalized, mediated, and adapted solicitation. -Recruitment during events and meetings. -Parental engagement in a wider variety of activities. -Formal and informal recognition of engagement.

Table 1. Partnership plans and parental engagement

As shown in the table 1, parental engagement is at the heart of the various means of action, which confirms that this is a significant object. More specifically, we observe a diversification of engagement and parental solicitation strategies (outreach). Between 2007 and 2009, teachers are part of a cycle of practice *transformation*. We know that the representations evolve with the practices (Abric, 1996) and that the partnership plans are also traces of practices.

Therefore, it consists of a discourse on practice. Moreover, in 2009, teachers tended to rely increasingly on the networks in which they were involved with the organizations of the community to solicit parents.

We previously mentioned that the discourse analysis on parental engagement revealed a series of tensions around antinomies. This type of dynamic can be considered as a sign of change in terms of social representations (Moscovici, 2000). We hypothesize that if interviews had been conducted later (not at the beginning of 2008, but in 2009), we would have observed the formation of "dialectical synthesis" between these units in tension. This would have resulted in a modification of the central elements by integrating the influence of peripheral elements through the effect of practices (Abrieu, 1996). Parents would probably have been deemed competent and the family environment could have been apprehended on a more contextual basis, through an opening on the environment on the teachers' part.

## 6. Conclusion

To make a very brief return on the analyzes that were carried out, teachers participating in the FECRE program in general had positive social representations on parental engagement which they considered *frequent* and *desirable*, but which they also regarded as obstacles because of the parents' belonging to a culture-of-poverty. In the context of market education, parents are "instrumentalized". They are perceived as "allies" whose function is necessary to support passively the teacher in the transmission of school knowledge to children. In this way, the study of the representations through this particular angle underscores the peripheral position of parents in the school "field". Consequently, our study sheds light on the importance of the structural factors associated with parental engagement, which leads us to suggest the use of structural homology with social representation (Deschamps & Moliner, 2008) to understand the unequal distribution of knowledge and resources in EDSC.

The study of parental engagement through the social representations viewpoint has not only highlighted the "top down" relation between school and family, but also a "horizontal approach". Social representations of parental engagement are not fixed or attached to a reified and non-consensual universe (Moscovici, 1984). We have seen, rather, that they evolve around strong dynamics, depending on the evolution of discourse on practices (partnership plans) and possibly on the practices themselves. We can consider the FECRE program as a dialectic field that allows the free flow of knowledge between the school, the family and the community. These findings confirm the thesis defended by Fernandez (2010) which was briefly presented previously. If the polarities found in the political discourse are often identified as constraints to the parent-teacher relationship (Atkinson, 1999), it is obvious from our analysis that the representational dynamics unfold around antinomies. Pelt and Poncelet (2012) use the concept of semantic field to describe the representational dynamic implemented at the crossroads of school, family and community. In continuity with them, we propose to study parental engagement as a themata. To put it simply, it refers to an image-concept that takes the form of systems of oppositions which are constructed through an exchange between plural discourse *internal* and *external* to a semantic field. Moscovici and Vignaux (2000) provide the following definition of themata:

They refer to possibilities of action and experience in common which can become conscious and integrated into past actions and experiences. In sum, the notion of theme indicates that the effective availability of meanings always goes beyond what may have been actualized by individuals or realized by institutions. (p. 163).

For the authors, themata are closely associated with dynamic processes by which actors make familiar what is unfamiliar through socio-discursive activities marked by dialectical tensions. Hence, according to Lawrence-Lighfoot (1978), we consider the gap between the school and the family as an area of potentialities instead of an obstacle. In other words, it emanates from the transformational potentialities of the school-family relationships. Therefore, making parents more familiar seems to be a dynamic and constructive process.

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