

# Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

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## Resumo

Na atualidade, os Institutos Federais constituem o espaço de atuação mais ocupado no campo da educação pelos Assistentes Sociais. Neste artigo, recorte de uma pesquisa mais ampla, analisamos as representações sociais do Assistente Social na Educação Profissional e Tecnológica (EPT) construídas por estudantes dos cursos de Ensino Médio Integrado do Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Pernambuco (IFPE) – *campus* Belo Jardim. O referencial da pesquisa é a Teoria das Representações Sociais, desenvolvida por Serge Moscovici. A pesquisa, de natureza qualitativa, foi realizada em duas etapas. Na primeira, utilizamos a entrevista semiestruturada e tivemos a participação de oito estudantes. Na segunda, em que participaram cinco estudantes da primeira etapa, utilizamos o grupo focal. Para a análise, utilizamos a Técnica de Análise de Conteúdo Categorial Temática. Os resultados mostraram que os(as) estudantes representam o Assistente Social como o profissional que informa e tira dúvidas. Esse conteúdo representacional está relacionado às relações que os(as) estudantes construíram com o Assistente Social.

**Palavras-Chave:** Assistente Social. Educação Profissional e Tecnológica. Representações Sociais.

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## A study about social representations of Social Workers constructed by students from the Integrated High School

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### **Abstract**

Today, Brazilian Federal Institutes constitute the most occupied space in education by Social Workers. In this work, part of a broader research, we analyzed the social representations of Social Workers in Professional and Technological Education (EPT), built by students from Integrated High School courses offered by the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Pernambuco (IFPE) – Belo Jardim city campus. The theoretical framework of the research is the Theory of Social Representations, developed by Serge Moscovici. The work, of a qualitative nature, was carried out in two steps. In the first step, we used a semi-structured interview, and we had the participation of eight students. In the second part, five students from the first step participated, we used the focus group (focal group). To carry out the analysis, the Thematic Category Content Analysis Technique was used. The results showed that students see the Social Worker as the professional who informs and answers questions. This representative content is associated with the relations that students built with the Social Worker.

**Keywords:** Social Worker. Professional and Technological Education. Social Representations.

# Un estudio sobre representaciones sociales del Trabajador Social concebidas por estudiantes de la Enseñanza Media Integrada

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## Resumen

En la actualidad, los Institutos Federales (IFs) constituyen el espacio de actuación más ocupado, en el ámbito de la educación, por los Trabajadores Sociales. En este artículo, fragmento de una investigación más amplia, analizamos las representaciones sociales del Trabajador Social en la Educación Profesional y Tecnológica (EPT) concebidas por estudiantes de los cursos de Enseñanza Media Integrada del Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Pernambuco (IFPE)- *Campus Belo Jardim*. El referencial teórico de la investigación es la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales, desarrollada por Serge Moscovici. La investigación, de carácter cualitativo, fue realizada en dos etapas. En el primer momento, utilizamos una entrevista semiestructurada, con la participación de ocho estudiantes. En el segundo momento, a través de un grupo focal, participaron cinco miembros de la etapa anterior. Para el análisis, recorrimos a la Técnica de Análisis de Contenido Temático Categorial. Los resultados mostraron que los estudiantes retratan al Trabajador Social como el profesional que informa y saca dudas. Ese contenido representacional demuestra el modo como los estudiantes se relacionan con el Trabajador Social.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajador social. Educación Profesional y Tecnológica. Representaciones Sociales.

## Introduction

The Social Worker operates in areas of vulnerability resulting from social inequalities that permeate society. The field of education thus becomes an important area of action for this professional, as these inequalities manifest in various forms within the school environment.

It is worth noting that the Education Policy at the national level has taken on a new shape regarding Vocational and Technological Education (EPT), following Decree No. 6,095/2007 (BRASIL, 2007), which established guidelines for the creation of Federal Institutes. This decree was legitimized with the publication of Law No. 11,892/2008 (BRASIL, 2008), which instituted the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education and created the Federal Institutes. Law No. 11,892/2008 (BRASIL, 2008), in its Article 2, defines Federal Institutes as: “[...] institutions of higher, basic, and vocational education, multi-curricular and multi-campus, specialized in offering Vocational and Technological Education in different modes of teaching [...]”.

According to Silva (2020), the majority of Social Workers were admitted to Federal Educational Institutions after 2009, mainly due to the creation of the Federal Institutes in 2008. The author emphasizes that the regulation of the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES) in 2010<sup>3</sup>, contributed to this admission, as it has been a target for funding from the Federal Government and has required institutions to implement it.

Within the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Pernambuco (IFPE), the Student Assistance Policy aims to support students in their academic activities and provides for the implementation of various support programs that facilitate students' retention in the institution. These programs include: the Permanent Scholarship Program (PBP)<sup>4</sup>, the Student Housing and Dining Program, the Support for Participation in Events Program, the Support for Technical Visits Program, the Student Assistance Program for the Youth and Adult Education Program (PROEJA), the Financial Assistance Program, the Occasional Benefit Program, the Biopsychosocial Monitoring

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<sup>3</sup> We highlight that the PNAES, developed by the National Forum of Community and Student Affairs Pro-Rectors (FONAPRACE) in 2001, at the end of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, was updated and submitted to the Ministry of Education (MEC) only in 2007. From that moment, discussions began with the MEC to implement this program, culminating in its approval through Normative Ordinance No. 39, dated December 12, 2007 (BRASIL, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> We note that, with the reformulation of the Student Assistance Policy at IFPE, following Resolution CONSUP/IFPE No. 133, dated June 30, 2022, the PBP was renamed as the Academic Maintenance Support Program. However, considering that this change is recent, we have chosen to continue using "PBP" in the text.

Program, the Arts and Culture Incentive Program, and the Sports and Leisure Incentive Program (IFPE, 2021).

In Federal Institutes, the Social Worker is part of a multidisciplinary team<sup>5</sup>, which allows for collaborative work based on the perception of the various dimensions that compose the educational process. In this way, some demands are brought to Social Services through these professionals, with the teacher being one of the main allies, as daily interactions with students in the classroom can facilitate the identification of various situations they are experiencing, leading to referrals regarding family and social issues. It is from these demands that the actions to be developed by Social Services within the Federal Institutes are defined.

The role of Social Workers in education is to enable the social rights of users through social programs and policies, identifying economic and sociocultural factors with the aim of minimizing issues within the educational context. Their professional practice unfolds into opportunities to support and monitor students' access, performance, and retention, seeking the realization of rights and the full exercise of citizenship present in teaching and learning processes.

This article is an excerpt from research conducted as part of a master's program, which aimed to analyze the social representations of Social Workers in Vocational and Technological Education (EPT) constructed by students in Integrated High School (EMI) courses at IFPE - Belo Jardim campus. In this article, we discuss part of the results of this research.

The Theory of Social Representations, developed by Serge Moscovici, serves as the theoretical-methodological framework for the study. According to Jodelet (2001), the social relationships we establish in everyday life are the result of social representations, a particular mode of knowledge that serves to shape behaviors and facilitate communication between individuals.

Thus, analyzing the social representations of Social Workers in EPT constructed by students completing the EMI can contribute to the improvement of this professional practice and enable an active and participatory role in the teaching and learning processes of these students.

<sup>5</sup> The multidisciplinary team is composed of a Social Worker, Psychologist, Pedagogue, Educational Affairs Technician, Sign Language Interpreters/Translators, Nutritionist, and other health professionals, Student Assistant, and Physical Education Teacher (IFPE, 2022).

## The Social Worker in Vocational and Technological Education at Federal Institutes

The expansion of the socio-occupational space of Social Services in Federal Institutes arises from the relationship between Student Assistance and Education Policy. According to Duarte (2019), Social Services in Federal Institutes were established with the responsibility of implementing assistance actions aimed at students "disadvantaged by fortune," as stated in the Code of Ethics for Social Workers. Thus, the aim was to ensure the retention of this population in school.

Duarte (2019) asserts that the conception of education that underpins the professional practice of Social Workers in the context of Vocational and Technological Education (EPT) is one that values a formation considering the social being, ethical aspects, professional practice, and intellectual, artistic, and emotional creativity, seeking to overcome individualism, prejudices, and so on. Therefore, it is a conception of education that is critical and emancipatory.

Social Workers in Federal Institutes are sought after in a diverse range of roles, given that the multiple expressions of social issues subject to the intervention of Social Workers are widely manifested in the school environment and affect the teaching and learning processes, hindering the provision of quality education (MARTINS, 2012; BULL, 2010; SILVEIRA, 2013; LESSA, 2013).

Prada (2015) asserts that the professional work of Social Workers should prioritize the context in which they operate, considering teachers, technicians, students, and the community, as well as the issues that directly influence the provision of quality education, such as the dynamics arising from the relationship between capital and labor.

In line with the observations made by Abreu (2017), we identify the primary demand for Social Workers in Federal Institutes as actions related to the management, planning, and direct execution of goods and services, stemming from the institutionalization of the National Student Assistance Policy, which is materialized through the implementation of the PNAES.

According to Duarte (2019), the PNAES guides the Institutes in the context of medium-level Vocational and Technological Education and has, as one of its principles, the holistic development of individuals, considering biological, cultural, and social aspects, thereby requiring the study and understanding of social issues. Due to the social responsibility involved, the inclusion of Social Workers in Federal Institutes became necessary, particularly in serving students in Integrated High School (EMI).

In this way, Social Workers in Federal Institutes have primarily been tasked with implementing the PNAES, which has progressively increased the allocation of resources for student

scholarships and assistance since 2010. According to Prada (2015), prior to this period, professionals engaged in activities related to students, staff, and the community, and had other avenues for action. However, the author notes a disorganization between these possible actions, concerning the responsibilities of the institution and those related to everyday work. Within this framework, the role of the Social Worker is situated in the context of the relationship between capital and labor, where intensifications lead to social inequalities that affect the school environment.

Amid this reality, it is important to recognize the possibilities that professionals have outlined to overcome such conditions within the institutions, such as the pursuit of expanding the professional's working space. The challenge lies in acting within this reality to move beyond an intervention that focuses on a reductionist view of Student Assistance and the institutional limitations imposed by reality, while understanding professional competencies and the ethical-political commitment of the profession<sup>6</sup>.

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In the next section, we discuss social representations.

<sup>6</sup> Duarte (2019) emphasizes that the changes began during the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, around 2003, with the expansion of the Federal Network. This expansion prompted managers to reflect on the professional demands needed in their campuses, leading to an immediate request for Social Workers to act in Student Assistance.

## Social Representations: Concept and Functions

The Theory of Social Representations was formulated by Serge Moscovici in France in the early 1960s. In the work that originated the theory, titled *La psychanalyse: son image et son public*, Moscovici aimed to understand how Freudian psychoanalytic theory was represented by different social groups in France (ÁLVARO; GARRIDO, 2006).

Moscovici (2003) states that social representations constitute socially structured and structuring fields, organizing mass interpretations and communications that enable the understanding of the social world and guide action. According to Moscovici (2003), social representations are modalities of practical knowledge aimed at communication and understanding the social, material, and ideational context in which we live, contributing to the construction of a common reality.

Moscovici (2003) further explains that people have a need to adjust and stay informed about the world around them, and thus they create representations, which are not merely individual constructions. Therefore, society provides the necessary conditions for the constitution of each person, considering that individuals also influence this society.

Jodelet (2001, p. 4-5) states that:

Social representation is a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, that has a practical objective and contributes to the construction of a common reality for a social group. Also referred to as 'common sense knowledge' or 'naive,' 'natural,' this form of knowledge is distinguished, among others, from scientific knowledge. However, it is considered a legitimate object of study just as much as the latter, due to its importance in social life and the insights it provides regarding cognitive processes and social interactions" (author's emphasis).

According to Jodelet (2001, p. 22), social representations are "[...] the product and process of an activity of appropriating the reality external to thought and of the psychological and social elaboration of that reality." Social representations thus constitute a means of practical knowledge, the common sense knowledge of a particular group, focusing on everyday life. This is understood as a process of assimilation of reality by the individual, in which their experiences, values, and the information circulating in daily life are integrated. They represent the set of explanations, beliefs, and ideas common to a specific group of individuals.

In this way, we reiterate the relevance of the Theory of Social Representations as a means to grasp the representations of Social Workers in Vocational and Technological Education (EPT)

constructed by students through daily interactions in the school environment. The study will help to understand how these representations emerge and what their meanings are, which will enhance the understanding of social reality.

In this direction, in the next section, we present the research methodology.

## Methodology

This research is of a qualitative nature. According to Minayo (2000), it is through qualitative research that we understand attitudes and meanings, which are aspects that cannot be measured through numbers.

We developed the master's research in two stages, with distinct yet complementary objectives. In the first stage, we utilized semi-structured interviews, and in the second, we conducted a focus group. The data collection in the second stage was carried out only after a preliminary analysis of the data collected in the first stage, with the aim of deepening the initial findings.

## Empirical Field of Research and Participation Criteria

The empirical field of the research was the IFPE - Belo Jardim campus. The choice was motivated by the geographic proximity to the campus of operation and the experiences built in daily professional practice, which sparked the interest in developing this research.

The IFPE has 16 campuses, distributed from the coast to the hinterlands of Pernambuco, along with a wide network of Distance Education, comprising 11 centers. With 52 years of existence, the IFPE - Belo Jardim campus has established itself as a reference point in education in the Agreste region of Pernambuco. Throughout its history, the former Agricultural School, as it was named at its inauguration in 1970, has contributed to the training of multiple generations of professionals.

Throughout its history, the campus has undergone various phases, but it was only on December 29, 2008, with the publication of Law No. 11,892 (BRASIL, 2008), that the Federal Agricultural School of Belo Jardim was elevated to the status of a campus of IFPE, currently offering courses at various levels and modalities of education. It offers integrated technical courses in Agriculture, Agroindustry, and Internet Computing, as well as a Bachelor's degree in Music Education and Software Engineering (IFPE, 2022).

Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social  
construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

We defined the participants of the research as students from the integrated technical courses, specifically those involved in the Student Assistance Policy. As inclusion criteria, we established that participants should be students in their 3rd year, aged between 17 and 20 years (the typical age range for graduating classes), who have had contact with the Social Worker during their education. We considered the profile of those who are completing their courses, as they have interacted with the Social Worker since entering the institution, experiencing the professional's role throughout their educational journey.

### Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

As indicated, in the first stage of the research, we utilized semi-structured interviews. This technique, according to Lakatos and Marconi (2003), aims to obtain information from the interviewee about a specific subject and can be used to verify facts, discover action plans, and understand the conscious motives behind opinions, feelings, or behaviors. Thus, the interview can be defined as a process of social interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, that occurs face-to-face between a researcher, who has a pre-defined objective, and an interviewee, who presumably possesses the information needed to study the phenomenon in question. This interaction is primarily mediated through language. The semi-structured interview is organized based on a predefined script, but it allows the researcher to ask questions outside of the planned framework.

We developed the interview script in two parts: 1) *Characterization questions*, which aimed to gather socioeconomic information about the student; and 2) *Questions about the research object*, including inquiries about the students' experiences and relationships with the Social Worker in Vocational and Technological Education (EPT). This included exploring students' impressions of the Social Worker's role at IFPE and the contributions that Social Services could provide to their education.

In the second stage, as mentioned, we used focus groups. The choice of this technique is justified by its ability to encourage participants to speak and react to the contributions of others, creating an environment as relaxed and close to the students as possible, allowing them to feel comfortable expressing their ideas and positions. The focus group relies on interaction among participants to gather the necessary data for the research. Its formation adheres to criteria previously determined by the researcher, in accordance with the research objectives, with the researcher

responsible for creating a favorable discussion environment that allows participants to express their perceptions and viewpoints (MINAYO, 2000).

We planned to conduct two focus groups. The scripts were developed considering the preliminary analyses from the first stage, aiming to obtain the information necessary to fulfill the study's objectives.

For the treatment of the information produced from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, we employed the Thematic Content Analysis Technique, as described by Bardin (2016). This technique comprises three stages: in the first, the pre-analysis, we conducted a thorough reading of the material based on the research objectives; in the exploration stage, we selected the units of record and context, followed by classification and aggregation to define the categories; in the final stage of result treatment and interpretation, we performed the analysis based on the theoretical framework.

### **The Journey in the Empirical Field**

The Research Project was submitted to the Brazil Platform, which directed it to a Research Ethics Committee (CEP). After the publication of the substantiated opinion from the CEP on the Platform, which occurred on September 28, 2022, we began our journey in the empirical field of the research.

Initially, we contacted the director of the institution to schedule an on-site visit. Once we received authorization, we visited each of the 3rd-year classes - there were three classes - to invite the students. During these visits, we presented the Research Project, highlighting the study's objectives and emphasizing that the target audience would be students participating in the Student Assistance Policy. At that moment, we provided a structured form requesting information such as name, email, phone number, and an indication of participation in any program of the Student Assistance Policy. We stressed that only those interested in participating in the research should fill it out. The following day, this form was submitted to the campus Social Worker, who forwarded it to us via email.

Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social  
construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

We reached a total of eight<sup>7</sup> students who agreed to participate in the research by completing the form. Subsequently, we made phone calls to schedule the date and time for the interviews, which were the technique used in the first stage of the research.

For the second stage of the research, in which we utilized focus groups, we developed the scripts based on the preliminary analyses from the first stage. The invitation to participate in this second stage was sent via WhatsApp to all the students who participated in the first stage. Five students expressed their desire to participate.

Considering the guidelines from the Ethics Committee, we requested via email that the guardians of students under 18 years of age read and authorize the students' participation by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE). After receiving authorization from the guardians, we asked the participants to read the TCLE and the Free and Informed Assent Form (TALE). We then required the minor student to sign the TALE, and the adults to sign the TCLE, agreeing to participate in the research.

We emphasize that all interviews and meetings were recorded with the prior consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis purposes.

The interviews took place from October 10 to 14, 2022, with an average duration of approximately 30 minutes each. As for the focus groups, two sessions were held in the campus meeting room on November 8 and 10, 2022. These meetings occurred during the students' lunch break, as agreed with the participants. The number of meetings was determined based on the saturation criterion, which is the point of completion where the inclusion of new information is no longer perceptible (GASKELL, 2008). Each meeting lasted an average of one hour.

## Characterization of Participants

As mentioned, eight students from the integrated technical courses served by the Student Assistance Policy at IFPE - Belo Jardim campus participated in the first stage of the research. In the second stage, five of those who participated in the first stage also took part. According to the inclusion criteria for selecting participants, all were in their third year of the integrated courses offered at the *campus*.

<sup>7</sup> In the Research Project, we anticipated the participation of 12 students in the first stage who fit the profile outlined in the inclusion criteria; for the second stage, we expected to continue with six participants from the first stage. This estimate was established because it is a requirement of the Brazil Platform to define the number of participants for the submission of the Project to the Ethics Committee. However, the empirical field redefined this number.

In this article, to preserve the identities of the students, we identified the participants using fictitious names: Ana, Bruno, Caio, Denis, Elaine, Felipe, Gisele, and Heitor. From these students, the following participated in the second stage: Ana, Bruno, Caio, Denis, and Elaine.

Table 1 below presents general characterization data of the participants.

**Quadro 1 – Characterization of Participants**

Name	Age	Race	Course	Social Programs	Based Quota: 1.5 times the minimum wage
Ana	18	Brown	Agroindustry	Brazil Aid	Yes
Bruno	17	White	Computer Science	No	No
Caio	17	White	Computer Science	Brazil Aid	No
Denis	18	Brown	Agriculture	Brazil Aid	Yes
Elaine	17	White	Computer Science	No	Yes
Felipe	17	Brown	Computer Science	No	No
Gisele	17	White	Computer Science	No	No
Heitor	18	Indigenous	Agriculture	Brazil Aid	Yes

**Source:** the authors.

In the next section, we present the results and discussions.

## Results and discussions

From the statements collected through the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, two thematic categories emerged that highlight the social representations of the Social Worker in Vocational and Technological Education (EPT) constructed by students in Integrated High School (EMI) courses at IFPE - Belo Jardim campus: 1) "The Social Worker is the professional of the

Scholarship"; 2) "The Social Worker is the professional who informs and clarifies doubts." In this article, we delve deeper into the second category identified.

## **The Social Worker is the Professional Who Informs and Clarifies Doubts**

In this category, the testimonies from students indicated social representations of the Social Worker as the professional who provides information and answers questions regarding scholarships, projects, academic records, attendance, enrollment, leave of absence, rights, and more. Let's look at excerpts from the students' statements during the interviews and the focus group:

I know that she provides a lot of information because whenever something happens, like, 'Oh, go check with the Social Worker; she should be able to help,' but I've never really needed to just for some information. [...] I think it's important to have someone with the talent [...] for communication, who contributes to the students' well-being by bringing information about what's happening and if there's anything important for the student. I think that's her contribution (ANA - interview)

She helps with the information available, not just about scholarships, but also, I think, extension projects [...] and assistance with documentation. When I was registering, I contacted the Social Worker here, and she guided me on filling out the documents correctly (BRUNO - focus group).

When addressing the actions, responsibilities, and contributions that Social Services can offer for student education at IFPE, the participants, whether in the interview or the focus group, stated:

In terms of the scholarship itself [...] because it used to be only with CGAE<sup>8</sup>, it became very complicated. If we submitted any incorrect documents, there was no way to know. So, having a Social Worker with us is essential because they clarify doubts. We arrive here and are always welcomed, and she answers many questions. There are various programs, and we can come and ask, 'Is this it?' She clears up a lot of doubts. So, without a Social Worker, it would be very complicated for us. [...] She is always monitoring students' situations regarding absences and grades. From what I see, in those announcements that come out, she's always there, lending a hand, helping with any incorrect documents, which happens a lot here. I think that's it; she's always closer to the students, right? (ELAINE - entrevista)

I think it's very important [...] the Social Worker answers a lot of questions about documentation and other things we can come and ask about. She always has the answers and tries to clarify our doubts (DENIS - focus group).

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<sup>8</sup> General Coordination of Student Assistance.

It's essential; I think it's extremely important because having this assistance here at the Institute or in any school allows us to properly guide students in addressing their doubts, rather than leaving them to figure things out on their own without knowing exactly what to do (ANA - focus group).

From the statements, it is possible to understand that the Social Worker is represented as the professional responsible for mediating the relationships that develop between the students and IFPE, as well as between IFPE and other social services and policies, facilitating student participation in matters related to the student community. He is recognized as the key articulator in activating intersectorality with other social policies, clarifying the role of Social Services in Student Assistance.

Regarding the importance of this professional, the students reveal, through the expressive aspects of the relationships formed, that the Social Worker is essential for their continued presence at the institution, as they provide information and answer questions about Student Assistance. Let's look at Caio's statement during the focus group:

[...] Although there can be classes without the Social Worker, in this school, certainly, with the absence of this professional, far fewer students would graduate from the institution, as they wouldn't have anyone to assist them with their doubts.

The students also represent the Social Worker as a channel of information about other sectors of the *campus*. According to them, this professional plays the role of providing assistance, including support for newcomers, as we can see in some statements:

[...] as this employee serves as a bridge between the campus sectors and the students, it is of utmost importance [...], because students, in addition to having their questions answered, need assistance with documentation and social interactions. This is important for students to enter the institution, stay, and succeed (CAIO - interview)

I think it's important to have a Social Worker here at the school because, without one, students would be very lost, especially new students who arrive and practically know nothing about what's happening. So, if there is a Social Worker, they can really help all of them. (ELAINE - focus group).

Although students represent the Social Worker as the professional who provides information and answers questions, it is important to consider that the Social Worker can contribute beyond this by adopting a more reflective and proactive role, aimed at suggesting actions that support students' retention at the institution. These are transversal actions linked to the educational support of these students.

Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social  
construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

In the students' testimonies, we observe that the Social Worker assists with enrollment, course withdrawals, and attendance - responsibilities typically associated with administrative staff, as explicitly noted by participant Caio during the focus group: "[...] she also helps us know about our attendance because in Q-academic<sup>9</sup> it shows there, but not the final percentage, so regarding that, it's really good because of this assistance." This reality reflects the student's understanding of the Social Worker's role in Student Assistance. In another statement, Caio reinforces:

Due to the complexity of social issues, I believe that assisting the student from a social perspective involves helping with documentation, such as enrollment, transfers, and academic records, as well as facilitating social interactions with other students and professionals, like teachers. [...].

Still during the focus group, some accounts reinforced Caio's statement:

I think she helps the students with their questions, whether it's about the Institute, for example, if you're unsure about a subject, like how to withdraw from a course, you go to her, and she clears up your doubts or guides you on the necessary documents (ANA).

I think the Social Worker is there to assist students when we don't want to go directly to CGAE, like for questions about ethics here, right? [...] If there's some doubt, like if a student does something wrong, for example, we don't know if it's ethical or not. We don't want to approach CGAE directly, so since we have the option to go to the Social Worker, we ask if it's ethical, if it's allowed or not, along with other questions, like [...] how to cancel enrollment, so we don't have to go directly to the administrative office for that and other things (BRUNO).

The responsibilities of the Social Worker in Federal Institutes become evident in daily practice, attributing characteristics shaped by the students, the territory, and the spaces they occupy. These responsibilities are constructed and consolidated within each *campus* in coordination with other administrative staff, fostering opportunities for experience exchange and strengthening this socio-occupational space. The professional identity is solidifying through the professional actions within the institution, as well as through the systematization of their responsibilities.

Regarding the issue of professional identity, Martinelli's (1991) studies, guided by a Marxist theoretical framework, argue that professional identity is conceived dialectically. The author emphasizes that thinking dialectically involves viewing the historical process as dynamic and always in motion. For her, identity, as a defining element of participation in the social division of labor and the totality of the social process, is a political and socio-historical category that is

<sup>9</sup> It is the integrated Academic Management system of IFPE.

constructed within the fabric of social relations, in the broader social space of class struggle and the contradictions that both engender and are engendered by it (MARTINELLI, 1991).

For the author, identity is constructed and objectified in praxis, as it expresses the professionally built response to meet the demands that arise in the field of action. In a more recent article, Martinelli (2013) emphasizes the profession as an essentially dynamic organization, characterized by intervention, collective work, and socially constructed participation in the overall work process. Therefore, for the author, identity is the material and concrete expression of the profession's essence; it is an open field of possibilities. The author states:

From a dialectical perspective, identity is a socio-historical category that pulses with time and movement, shaped by political, social, economic, historical, and cultural determinations. As an ethical-political category, with consciousness as its natural corollary, identity is constructed in the fertile ground of difference, within antagonistic social relations (MARTINELLI, 2013, p. 145).

Thus, for the author, professional identity must be unveiled dialectically, taking into account the relationships of structure, context, and daily life that reshape and determine ways of accessing the interpretation of the realities that constitute the elements of identity formation. As she states, "the question of identity is an ontological question that prompts us to consider not only what professions are, but how they manifest socially and how they participate in the process of social reproduction" (MARTINELLI, 2013, p. 151).

Thus, we can say that the social representations of the Social Worker in Vocational and Technological Education (EPT) constructed by the participating students reveal elements of the Social Worker's professional identity, as these social representations are built within the dynamics of social relations.

In this regard, we highlight that the students stated that their contact with the Social Worker was essential for them to continue their Integrated High School (EMI), emphasizing the relationship that students have with the Social Worker. Let's look at some testimonies.

Every time I went to the Social Worker, she always responded with a lot of courtesy, always attentively, and every time she finished explaining, she would ask again if I had cleared my doubts, if I wanted her to explain again, to really make sure I understood, and she always made it very clear by addressing my questions (ANA - focus group).

Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social  
construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

[...] every time I sought assistance from the Student Assistance and the Social Worker here, my doubts and pending issues were always resolved. Despite the issue with timing, since our full-day schedule is a bit tight, we always find a way to sort these matters out, and they have always been clarified (BRUNO - focus group).

Every time I go there, she really explains how things are, and the last time she explained it to me, the first time I went, I couldn't get it, but then I went back again, and she explained, and I was able to do what I wanted. [...] She is always available (DENIS - interview).

Every time I go there, my issues are resolved, and if I don't understand something well, she explains it multiple times calmly, so I can grasp it. The timing is a bit complicated because sometimes you go and don't find her, but we always manage (CAIO - interview).

We observe in these testimonies two functions of social representations, according to Abric (2000): the function of orientation, which guides people's behaviors and practices, and the function of justification, which allows individuals or groups to explain and justify their conduct.

In this sense, we can say that there is a relationship of trust established between the professional and the student who utilizes the services offered by Student Assistance. However, despite the Social Worker providing guidance, explanations, and addressing issues of rights with the attending student, there are occasions when this dialogue does not achieve the professional's initial goal, which is to ensure access, performance, and retention of students while seeking the realization of rights and the full exercise of citizenship in the processes of teaching and learning.

Regarding the guarantee of rights, participant Denis, in his statement, mentions the Social Worker as a professional who seeks to ensure the rights of students by sharing knowledge that contributes to strengthening the social relationships of students with the student community, as we can see in his comments during the focus group:

I think she provides support for us because sometimes we have certain rights, but we don't even know about them. So, we come here, knock on her door, and she presents... shows us that we are entitled to those rights. I believe she helps us understand that we also have rights and how to take advantage of them.

It is possible to observe in this statement that the participant highlights the Social Worker as a dynamic and active professional who is mindful of rights and citizenship. By operating in the field of rights protection, the work of the Social Worker necessarily involves the defense and/or realization of social citizenship rights. In this sense, it tends to contribute to the sharing of power and its democratization. The very substance of their work (the social issue), by linking it to multiple

dimensions of social life, requires that the themes of rights and citizenship permeate their interventions.

Thus, we agree with Jodelet (2005) when she states that by accessing social practices and relationships, we get closer to the representations that sustain them. According to Almeida (2009, p. 728), social representations are constructed "[...] in the perceptions that individuals create of the relationships between groups and categories and in the social experiences they share with others [...]" . In this way, students understand the Social Worker through the reinterpretation of their experiences. Perrusi (1995, p. 61) asserts that social representations are:

[...] a system of interpretation of reality, organizing the relationships between individuals and the world and guiding their conduct and behaviors in the social environment. This interpretative system is rooted in forms of social communication, allowing individuals to internalize experiences, social practices, and models of behavior.

However, it is important to note that the representations developed by students are socially constructed as both collective and individual experiences; each experience can lead to a unique representation of what the Social Worker is.

Regarding the materialization of the Student Assistance Policy at IFPE, it is essential to consider how the relationship between the Social Worker and the subjects of this policy namely, the students occurs, highlighting the importance of the pedagogical function of the Social Worker within Student Assistance. According to Piana (2009), the pedagogical role of the Social Worker lies in the connections established by the profession with social classes and individuals, aiming to enhance, through public policies, the fostering of struggles and resistance against the demands of capital. This means seeking the political formation and organization of society, such as mobilizing students and working alongside them to encourage participation in advocacy movements, or engaging in joint reflection spaces with other school agents, like teachers or other Social Workers, in meetings with the Student Assistance team at IFPE or other institutions.

As mentioned, the relationship of trust is extremely important for the work to be carried out at IFPE. However, the understanding that students have about the Social Worker is still heavily influenced by the idea of solidarity and favor, a historical marker in the construction of Social Work policy, which continues to be misunderstood as a right. This misunderstanding interferes with the actual understanding of the purpose of the services offered, as emphasized by participant Bruno during the interview: "I hope these results bring improvements to this sector, so that more and more

Um estudo sobre representações sociais do Assistente Social construídas por estudantes do Ensino Médio Integrado

students can be helped." Participant Caio added during the focus group: "There are some things I didn't know the Social Worker could help us with, and now I know."

The participants' testimonies also highlight that the Social Worker's work aims to contribute to the comprehensive human development of students, focusing on key contributions: operationalizing the necessary resources for students' retention at the Institute, ensuring material and social support for academic success, and providing guidance on rights and responsibilities, fostering a critical and reflective awareness among students.

From the dialogues obtained with the group, it was possible to perceive how daily life experiences influence the context of representation, as they prompted participants to reflect and understand what their constructs mean, both as individuals and as social beings.

In this sense, we can observe in the testimonies during the focus group when students highlight the meanings of the terms Social Assistance and Student Assistance: "Social Assistance is to solve problems in society for other people. Student Assistance is to solve issues related to students or to support the student; that's what I think" (ANA); "I believe Social Assistance helps with social problems in daily life, while Student Assistance helps both students and faculty and the entire student body of the campus" (BRUNO).

In these statements, students demonstrate an understanding of the Social Worker as a professional who helps resolve issues, whether social or academic, as they provide answers and information on various matters. According to Prada (2015), Student Assistance should be discussed from the perspective of multiple functions - social, pedagogical, psychological, and economic - which can be expanded to include other aspects based on the local context of the institution.

Thus, it should not be confused with a *lócus* of "Social Assistance" actions, as Student Assistance is a specific service provided under the PNAES framework, which is a program of the Education Policy. Social Assistance, on the other hand, consists of a specific policy of social protection, which is part of the constitutional framework of Social Security, along with Health and Social Welfare policies. It should not be misinterpreted, as noted by Prada (2015, p. 28), as "an act of favor or charity for the poor," given its public nature as a social right.

Thus, we refer to Moscovici (2003), who asserts that social representations are linked to language, the symbolic universe, ideology, the social imaginary, and the role they play in guiding conduct and social practices. For the author, communication and the production of knowledge are intertwined with language as a mediator of social representations, which are shaped by information,

making it a fundamental element in the interactive process of subject/object/subject. In this context, as language serves as the mediating core of the individual's knowledge in social interaction within the daily work of the Social Worker, it becomes an important element in the construction of social representations.

In this category, we reiterate that the social representations of students revealed that the Social Worker is an essential professional at IFPE. The testimonies highlight the contributions of the Social Worker to the students' educational journey concerning access, retention, and academic success.

## Final considerations

The results of the research showed that the social representations constructed by students, viewing the Social Worker in the EPT as a professional who informs and answers questions not only about issues like scholarships and projects but also about rights reflect representational content linked to the reconfiguration of the Social Work role.

The social representations of students revealed that the Social Worker is fundamental to their holistic education. For them, this professional effectively contributes to their academic journey. Thus, these representations justify the trust established between the professional and the student, highlighting the functions of orientation and justification of the constructed social representations.

Considering education from a critical and transformative perspective, which enables the development of citizenship and contributes to the fight against inequalities and social exclusion, we reaffirm the relevance of this study and emphasize the importance of further research on the topic, focusing on other segments of the school community through the lens of Social Representation Theory. This approach aims to contribute to the knowledge production regarding the Social Worker in the EPT and enhance this professional practice.

Through this research, we deepened our understanding of the Social Worker in the EPT and the EMI, exploring the universe of their professional practice. This insight allows us to grasp the journey toward a more equitable society that transcends educational duality and guarantees everyone the right to comprehensive education, fostering the democratization of teaching. Thus, with this knowledge, combined with the social representations of students, we build supports that help define the Social Worker's strategic and mobilizing role within IFPE.

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