

**QUALITY OF EDUCATION: REPRESENTATIONS IN PUBLIC HIGHER
EDUCATION STUDENTS IN BRAZIL**

***QUALIDADE DE ENSINO: REPRESENTAÇÕES EM ESTUDANTES DO ENSINO
SUPERIOR PÚBLICO NO BRASIL***

***CALIDAD DEL ENSEÑO: REPRESENTACIONES EN LOS ESTUDIANTES DE
EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR PÚBLICA EN BRASIL***



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ABSTRACT: This study aims to identify and discuss the representational elements produced by public higher education students regarding the quality of education. For that, it was based on the Theory of Social Representations. The quality of education is an important planning factor for educational systems in the world and in Brazil. In the Brazilian context, there is a lack of studies that discuss how university students, involved in the teaching-learning process, represent the quality of the courses attended. 307 students participated in the research. The results propose a view of the quality of higher education associated with a “system of representational elements” linked to different representations (of the course, of education, and of the university), organized around the expectations of the subjects in relation to quality professional training. Five representational elements were identified, and in their interaction, they point to a profile of “quality education” used as a criterion for the researched group.

KEYWORDS: Social Representations. Quality of education. Public university.

RESUMO: *Este estudo visa identificar e discutir os elementos representacionais produzidos por estudantes do ensino superior público a respeito da qualidade de ensino. Para tanto, fundamentou-se na Teoria das Representações Sociais. A qualidade de ensino apresenta-se como importante fator de planejamento para os sistemas educacionais, no mundo e no Brasil. No contexto brasileiro aponta-se a ausência de estudos que discutam como os alunos das universidades, envolvidos no processo ensino-aprendizagem, representam a qualidade dos cursos frequentados. Participaram da pesquisa 307 sujeitos de uma universidade pública. Os resultados propõem uma visão da qualidade do ensino superior associada a um “sistema de elementos representacionais” vinculados a diferentes representações (do curso, do ensino e da universidade), organizada em torno das expectativas dos sujeitos em relação a uma formação profissional de qualidade. Cinco elementos representacionais foram identificados, e em sua interação apontam para um perfil de “ensino de qualidade” utilizado com critério para o grupo pesquisado.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Representações Sociais. Qualidade de ensino. Universidade pública.*

RESUMEN: *Este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar y discutir los elementos representacionales producidos por estudiantes de educación superior pública sobre la calidad de la educación. Para ello, se basó en la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales. La calidad de la educación es un importante factor de planificación de los sistemas educativos en el mundo y en Brasil. En el contexto brasileño, faltan estudios que discutan cómo los estudiantes universitarios, involucrados en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, representan la calidad de los cursos. Participaron 307 sujetos de una universidad pública. Los resultados proponen una visión asociada a un “sistema de elementos representacionales” vinculados a distintas representaciones (de la graduación, de la docencia, y de la universidad), organizadas en torno a las expectativas de los sujetos con relación a una formación profesional de calidad. Se identificaron cinco elementos representacionales, y en su interacción apuntan a un perfil de “educación de calidad” utilizado como criterio para el grupo investigado.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Representaciones Sociales. Calidad de educación. Universidad pública.*

Introduction

Taking a look at education in Brazil, and more specifically at higher education, means seeking an understanding that involves not only issues related to its structural evolution or the conditions defined by public policies and government actions; it also involves a complex system of social actors, such as teachers, students and other professionals, with their beliefs, values and expectations in relation to the university, the course and the teaching offered. Such aspects influence social practices and generate individuals' positions in the relationship with this educational environment.

Inserted in this context, it is proposed to address a relevant aspect in discussions regarding educational systems and those that comprise them, namely, the quality of teaching, based on a set of representational elements produced by subjects in their daily practices.

From a psychosocial perspective, which seeks to understand the social reality in which individuals support their understanding of the world to better deal with it (RATEAU *et al.*, 2012), the present study was based on the Theory of Social Representations (TRS), originally presented by Serge Moscovici (2012) in the 1960s, with the objective of identifying the representational elements prioritized by public higher education students in relation to the quality of teaching.

The term quality, established as one of the fundamental principles of Education in Brazil, ³has increasingly presented itself as a relevant factor in the evaluation of its institutions, in the comparison between public and private, in students' choices, and in the judgment of the education work market. As Cunha (2014) highlights, expressions such as: “for a quality education”, or “education of excellence”, are common in everyday society.

The qualitative assessment of higher education, according to Dias, Horiguela and Marchelli (2006), was established as a form of accountability to society given the considerable increase in educational institutions, with consequent growth in enrollment in this type of education, motivated by the search for greater professional qualifications to access the job market, starting in the 1980s and 1990s.

³ In Brazil, the “guarantee of a quality standard” is presented as one of the teaching principles, in Article 206 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which underlies the 1996 LDB, in its Section IX of Article 3.

Quality of teaching and higher education in Brazil

When dealing with the main definitions of quality linked to higher education from the 1990s onwards, Moraes and Kalnin (2018) found that there was no consensus regarding its meaning. They assert that in Brazil the understanding around quality is guided by political aspects that move away from the reality of the country's educational institutions. For these authors, LDB/1996 (BRASIL, 1996) only presents quality as an objective to be achieved, without clarifying its composition. They also state that the National Education Plan – PNE (BRASIL, 2014), in its Article 2, does not make clear the aspects that define its application.

This reality promotes a dispersion in understanding and actions to transform the educational system, linked to pedagogical practices and visions. For example, the very principle of inseparability between teaching, research and extension, according to Braido, Conto and Cerutti (2021), has presented itself as a challenge for institutions.

For Gatti (2014), this context results from the neoliberal advance on the Brazilian educational system, establishing the so-called Evaluative State, where governmental concern is linked to the implementation of managerial practices in political systems to increase efficiency and effectiveness through control and measuring results.

Through Law 10,861 (BRASIL, 2004), the National Higher Education Assessment System (SINAES) was created, which, according to Filho (2018, p. 263, our translation), arises under the premise that education is a “[...] public good, whose social responsibility is expressed in solid training for citizenship and the development of a democratic and fair society”. In this way, the objective was to monitor higher institutions using three evaluation systems: internal and external evaluation; the evaluation of undergraduate courses; and student assessment.

The implementation of this process in Brazil takes place through the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), supervised by the National Commission for the Assessment of Higher Education (CONAES). To this end, it uses ENADE as its main instruments/indicators, where it seeks to evaluate the knowledge acquired by students in relation to the curricular content concerning their undergraduate course; the Preliminary Course Concept (CPC), used as a performance indicator published every three years, which aims to signal the situation of undergraduate courses in the country; and the General Course Index (IGC), whose objective is to synthesize the quality of all higher education courses, including postgraduate courses, into a single indicator.

Among the stages of on-site *evaluation*, an *evaluation* report is generated in which the criteria measured by INEP are presented, under three dimensions: the Didactic-Pedagogical

Organization of the course, its Faculty, and its Infrastructure. At the end, a Course Concept – CC is generated (INEP, 2017). Each dimension that forms the CC has a weight for the calculation, which are respectively 30, 40 and 30, and each dimension consists of about fifty-eight items distributed by the three dimensions.

In this way, the Ministry of Education uses formal and objective indicators as markers of the quality of Higher Education in Brazil, using them as criteria for regulation and supervision of the country's Educational Institutions, with regard to the accreditation and de-accreditation of courses, among other aspects.

However, for Cunha (2014), although quantitative criteria are important attributes for measuring quality, this also requires other ways of being expressed, especially with regard to the “meaning of the action, the meaning it can have for someone or for a collective” (CUNHA, 2014, p. 460, our translation). According to the author, the indicators are important, but they do not consider the reality of the “main axis” of the educational system, which is the teaching process. It also asserts that teaching and learning practices, and the work carried out by the individuals involved in this process, are aspects that need to be considered in quality assessment measures.

TRS: conceptual aspects and phenomena in the educational field

Through its theoretical framework, TRS has contributed to relevant research for the understanding of social phenomena in various areas, including the educational field, as observed in: Campos (2013), Novaes, Sousa and Villas Bôas (2019), Nascimento, Ornellas and Rodrigues (2019), Silva (2020), among others.

A representation, according to Campos (2003), can be understood as structured knowledge that plays a determining role in the way individuals deal with reality. This reality is above all social, and according to Rateau *et al.* (2012), composed of the social characteristics of individuals and shared by a similar group. For Abric (2000, p. 29, our translation) it is “[...] a functional vision of the world that, in turn, allows the individual or group to give meaning to their conduct and understand reality through their own system of references, allowing [...] to adapt and find a place in this reality”.

In this way, social representation means a cognitive system whose action on the individual who constructed it and the situation that surrounds it, does not occur in isolation. This action takes place through relationships of meaning that promote identity to the group and

guide its practices. It is, therefore, a system of normative beliefs directed towards action, offering meaning to a given social situation, behaviors and conduct.

Rateau *et al.* (2012) describe that social representations are structured, shared, collectively produced and allow the interpretation of the social environment through a communication process, inserted in a social context in which individuals form consensual cognitive realities. This way of analyzing representations belongs to the TRS structural approach. This proposes that in a social representation there is a socio-cognitive system composed of two subsystems: one central and the other peripheral (ABRIC, 2003).

As Rateau describes *et al.* (2012), the central nucleus gives meaning to the other elements that constitute the representational field, constituting and stabilizing its internal organization. This is where the consensus of representation is found, formed by the social, symbolic and historical determinisms shared by the subjects. In the peripheral system, according to the authors mentioned, the elements result from a more flexible relationship with the daily lives of individuals, allowing them to adapt to multiple social contexts. This reflects the behaviors and positions faced in the situations faced, and despite the various opinions that may be identified, these do not deviate from the central core, maintaining their stability.

Campos (2022) proposes that subjects build “representational systems” in their interactions to deal with more complex social situations. Silva *et al.* (2012, p. 441, our translation), seeking to conceptualize the system of social representations, define it as “[...] a socially shared knowledge formed by a set of representational objects, which, in turn, are constituted by a set of representational elements”. The authors add that the representational elements of this system form a network of meanings and symbols, presenting an interrelationship that gives it a certain coherence and meaning.

For Campos (2022), representational systems are a way to understand the determinations of representations about practices. Corroborating this perspective, Abdalla and Villas Bôas (2018) assert that applied to the educational field, the concept of system of representations can enable a deeper social perspective on practices in this area, favoring the possibility of social change.

Starting from the premise that teaching quality can be understood as a construct present in the symbolic world of the university and university culture, present in the communication of subjects involved with the educational process, regarding teaching, the university and undergraduate courses, and considering the importance of students and teachers in the teaching-learning process, it is understood that deepening such discussion from these actors will allow a

closer approximation to the reality of teaching practiced and experienced by them, making it possible to support new public policies aimed at practices educational issues related to higher education.

In summary, through TRS we intend to know the most consensual representational elements and get closer to a probable organization, that is, identification of the contents that are prioritized by the subjects to define/delimit the quality of teaching and judge whether the course has or not quality in the training offered.

Method

Considering the objective proposed above, which is to identify and discuss the representational elements that higher education students elaborate on the quality of teaching, as the first delimitation of the group to be studied, we sought to investigate students from a Brazilian public university. Understanding that “teaching quality” cannot be considered, in a conceptual and precise way, as an “object of social representation”, but as the result of a system of objects, which allows these subjects to evaluate the training received and guide their social practices as “higher education students”. In the present study, we focused on identifying and discussing elements associated with the representations of “higher education”, “higher education” and “university”.

Subjects and *locus*

Three hundred and seven students from a public university participated in the research, distributed across three major areas of knowledge according to the classification of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development - CNPq, being: 109 subjects from the Health area; 100 of Agricultural Sciences; and 98 from Social and Human Sciences.

Initially, areas considered to be in greatest demand would be selected, but this aspect was not reflected in the empirical field, and areas were selected where students were allowed access to collect data.

As a criterion, we sought students from face-to-face courses who were pursuing their degree from the seventh period of the course onwards, regardless of age group or gender. This choice was based on the understanding that the group studied could have a minimum experience of the university context, in terms of its relationship with other actors (teachers and other students), structure and other aspects involving the academic environment. As the object of this

work is to investigate the greatest possible extent of this relationship, it was considered that investigating students from initial periods would not meet the proposed objective, as they began in the exclusively distance learning period, a situation that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred from December 2019, and normalized in person only in the first academic semester of 2022.

Research instruments and analysis procedures

The instrument developed was a questionnaire, in which the slogan induced the subjects to think about “their experience as an undergraduate student”, that is, based on their experience as university students, the questionnaire was composed of three questions: the first focused on the students’ view of the “quality of a course”; the second had as its “object” the “quality of teaching”, in the sense of “higher education”; and finally, the last question dealt, in a metaphorical way, with the “quality of the university”.

Thus, Question 1 was of the inductive word association type, with the following formulation: “ considering 'your experience' as an undergraduate student, what are the words or expressions that come to your mind when you think about a quality course (submit at least 3 answers).”

Question 2 was composed of a list of sentences that each presented indicators used by INEP as criteria for evaluating the quality of undergraduate courses to form the “Course Concept (CC)”, whose indicators are organized into three dimensions: didactic-pedagogical organization, teaching and tutorial staff, and infrastructure (INEP, 2017). From the total of indicators, twenty-one were selected (balanced between the three dimensions), which could be recognized by individuals in their daily relationship with the university, such as: the “existence of a library”, or “pedagogical support equipment” (infrastructure dimension). The question was prepared as follows: “Read the list below carefully. Choose only 07 (seven) most characteristic, or most important, items to define the quality of teaching, filling in the blank spaces with the letters corresponding to the chosen items”. The list can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1 – List prepared to construct the “characterization or selection” question based on the INEP assessment instrument

- | |
|--|
| <p>A) atividades e práticas de ensino contextualizadas com as demandas regionais da profissão.
 B) salas de aula adequadas, com estrutura e disponibilidade de recursos tecnológicos.
 C) corpo docente com titulação e regime de trabalho adequados.
 D) colegiado de curso atuante e com representatividade de alunos.
 E) biblioteca com a bibliografia básica e complementar disponíveis.
 F) projeto pedagógico compatível com a formação profissional oferecida.
 G) corpo docente com experiência no exercício da docência superior.
 H) laboratórios didáticos para formação profissional.
 I) coordenador de curso atuante e com carga horária adequada.
 J) autoavaliação do curso como instrumento de melhoria.
 K) apoio estrutural e metodológico para a realização de trabalhos de conclusão de curso (TCC).
 L) estágio supervisionado com carga horária, convênios, e integração com o mundo do trabalho.
 M) disponibilização de núcleos de prática profissional durante a formação.
 N) corpo docente com experiência profissional no mercado de trabalho.
 O) produção e distribuição de material didático aos alunos.
 P) acesso aos equipamentos de informática.
 Q) docentes com produção científica, cultural, artística ou tecnológica.
 R) ambiente virtual de aprendizagem.
 S) ações de apoio ao estudante (incluindo espaços de convivência, centros acadêmicos, agremiações, dentre outros).
 T) sala coletiva de professores e espaço de trabalho em tempo integral para o coordenador e corpo docente.
 U) corpo docente com experiência em tutoria e educação à distância.</p> |
|--|

Source: Prepared by the authors based on indicators used by INEP (2017)

Question 3 was of the “dilemma proposition” type so that the subjects could imaginarily place themselves in a situation in which they could improve the quality of the university. In this question, subjects were asked to respond to the following formulation: “If you were Rector of the University, what would you change to improve the university?”

After preparing the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out, applying it to one hundred (100) university students from a private institution with the aim of evaluating the respondents' perception regarding the research instrument, that is, whether there was clarity in the questions, if the form had flaws, or any other observation that could lead to necessary corrections and improvements. In the pilot study, the instrument was considered by more than 95% of the subjects as interesting or stimulating, with no notes or complaints about specific items.

During the data collection process, there was a good receptivity towards the students, of the 315 respondents reached, only 5 did not wish to participate, returning the blank form. In addition to these, 03 forms were invalidated, containing incomplete or erased answers, resulting in 307 questionnaires validated for analysis. The average response time for the questionnaires was approximately 15 minutes per person. After collection, the responses were transcribed on the computer, to form analysis *corpora in support software*.

Results

Question 1: free word association for prototypicality analysis

The responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and prepared for use in the *EVOC/SIMI 2016 software*. During the preparation of the *corpus*, we tried to evaluate words with the same meaning such as: “structure” and “infrastructure”, which in the context of the subjects' speeches meant the same thing, and so on. Spelling corrections were also made, but in all these procedures we sought to preserve the original meanings of the answers.

The generated picture can be seen in Figure 2. The results allow a first approximation of the representational field, suggesting a probable organization of the representations of the analyzed group. Thus, in the first quadrant (top left) a possible central nucleus is indicated, whose elements are probably represented by the words: “infrastructure”, “practical classes”, “updated teaching”, “qualified teachers”, “organization”, “commitment” and “technology”.

In the upper right quadrant there are words that indicate elements probably in the first periphery: “scientific knowledge”, “student assistance” and “accessibility”. These are high-frequency elements, but not readily evoked. In the third quadrant (bottom left), there are the likely elements of the contrast zone, highlighted by two evocations: “empathy” and “responsibility”. According to Silva (2020), the elements that form the contrast zone can reinforce notions contained in the 1st periphery or in the central core.

In the lower right quadrant are the elements most distant from the representation, which according to Silva (2020) can hardly constitute a central nucleus, but which demonstrate a closer relationship with social practices. The main words were: opportunities, market, investment, reception, inclusion, curriculum, internship, teaching and evaluation.

Figure 2 – Evocations induced by Question 1 (Considering your experience as an undergraduate student, what are the words or expressions that come to mind when you think of a “quality course”?)

Frequência >= 25	OME < 2,9			OME >= 2,9		
	Zona do Núcleo Central			1ª Periferia		
	Elementos	f	OME	Elementos	f	OME
Frequência >= 25	Infraestrutura	102	2,804	Conhecimento científico	61	3,351
	Aulas práticas	101	2,789	Assistência estudantil	40	3,840
	Ensino atualizado	92	2,541	Acessibilidade	28	3,179
	Professores qualificados	90	2,011			
	Organização	59	2,444			
	compromisso	36	2,750			
	tecnologia	28	2,571			
Frequência < 25 e >= 14	Zona de Contraste			2ª Periferia		
	Empatia	15	2,667	Oportunidades	24	4,000
	Responsabilidade	14	2,500	Mercado	21	3,476
				Investimento	21	3,333
				Acolhimento	18	2,944
				Inclusão	19	3,316
				Grade curricular	17	3,706
				Estágio	17	3,412
				Material didático	15	3,133
				Didática	14	3,214
			Avaliação	14	3,500	

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data generated by the *EVOC/SIMI 2016 software*

In summary, considering that this technique allows a first identification of the relevant elements in the functioning of the SR, as well as a first approximation of structural hypotheses, about the relationship between the elements. In this sense, these results lead us to propose an interpretative hypothesis according to which the social representation of a “quality’ course” is organized around the elements: a) linked to the “infrastructure” of the course, assuming, laboratories, access to material and technological resources, prepared rooms, internet and library access, *etc.*; b) strong element of need for “practical classes”, (also associated with the word “internships”, in the periphery) this points to both laboratories, internships and other types of academic activities linked to the practical exercise of professions; c) a probable element appears that indicates the need for “updated teaching”, without it being possible to know, at this stage of the results, about what modality or nature of this “update”, whether it is a scientific update or in relation to practices professionals or job market; d) in the same way, it is not possible to know at this point, the criteria for the probable central element, “qualified teachers”, whether the reference is a degree, production in extension or research, or in reference to the job market; e) still in the hypotheses of centrality, we can highlight the “organization” of the course, reinforced by the word “curriculum” on the periphery. It can be thought that both the updating of teaching and the qualification of teachers may be linked to the issue of professional training

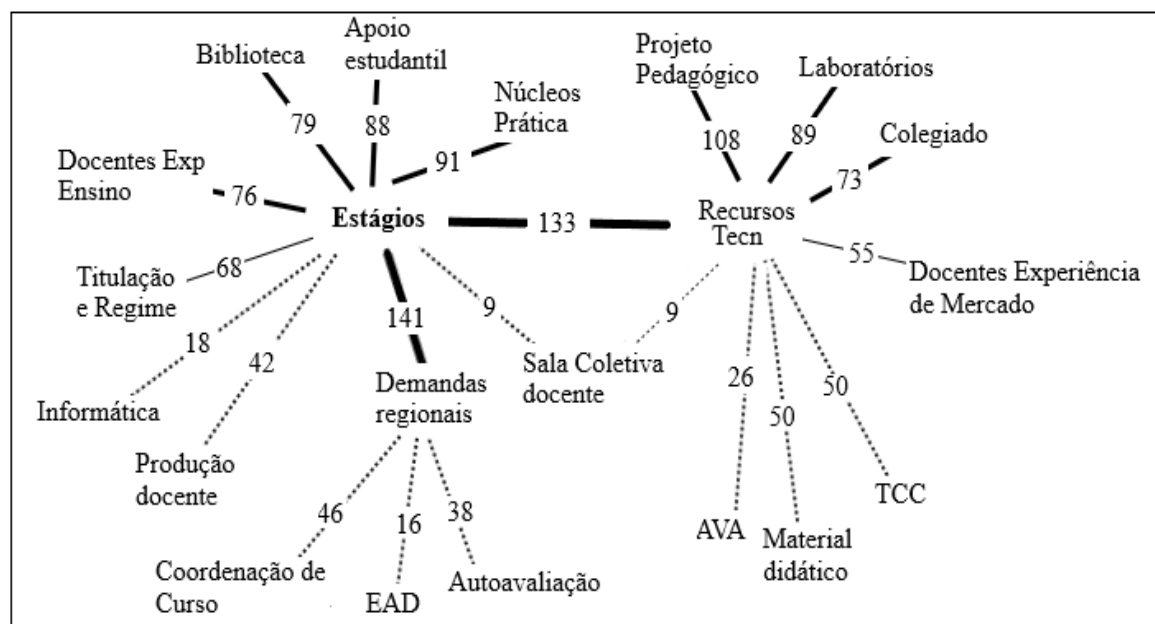
itself and the job market, due to the presence of the words “opportunity”, “market” and “investment”, on the distant outskirts.

We can also highlight in terms of peripheral elements (very consensual and important in the daily functioning of representation), an element linked to “student assistance”; hypothesis reinforced by words such as “accessibility”, “welcome” and “inclusion”.

Question 2: characterization and selection for similarity analysis

The results were subject to a statistical analysis with a similarity index, and organized in a “maximum tree” type graph, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Maximum tree related to teaching quality from public higher education students



Source: prepared by the authors based on data generated by the *SIMI software 2016*

The analysis presented illustrates a “maximum tree”⁴ of connectivity between the elements of the representational field related to the definition of teaching quality for university students in the public sector, when faced with the indicators used by INEP. In graphs resulting from statistical similarity relationships, in “trees”, the branches mean the distances, or proximity between the elements, allocated at the vertices, the representational elements. The more elements aggregated around it, the presumption is that there is a likely central core of the

⁴According to Sá (1996), this is the graphical construction used in similarity analysis, compared to a tree (as the elements that come together look like branches) that presents the highest sum of edge values among the other possible relations of the elements.

representation. Otherwise, if there are few elements nearby, it is considered to be the periphery (CAMARGO, 2020).

The maximum tree is a resource for visualizing structuring relationships, so the representation of “Teaching Quality” appears to be organized around two elements, probably central, and which organize, around each one respectively, the set of other elements, configuring what we can call two blocks, one having as its pole the “internships” element; and the other, around the element “technological resources”.

Around the element “internships”, there are connections with greater intensity (stronger), the elements “internships and practical activities contextualized with the regional demands of the profession”⁵, “professional practice centers”, “student support”, “library” and “teachers with experience in higher education”. At the other pole, the element “technological resources” brings together the most intense connections with “pedagogical project compatible with professional training”, “teaching laboratories for professional training”, “active course collegiate and with student representatives”, and “teachers with experience in the business market”.

These results point to a vision of teaching quality that is very focused on the quality of professional training, with emphasis on the need for practical activities (internships, practice centers and laboratories) aimed at learning professional practices; the valorization of infrastructure aimed at this learning; the existence of a qualified teaching staff, both in terms of teaching capacity and insertion (experience) in the job market. One highlight draws attention, which is the knowledge and appreciation of a “pedagogical project”, although pointing out that it is compatible “with the training that is desired to be offered”, associated with the need for an “active collegiate and with student representatives”. It does not seem abusive to think that the subjects point to the organization of the course, in its project and in the management of the project by the board; this towards professional training that is coherent, consistent and in tune with the current scenarios of professional practices.

Question 3: Dilemma induction for CHD analysis

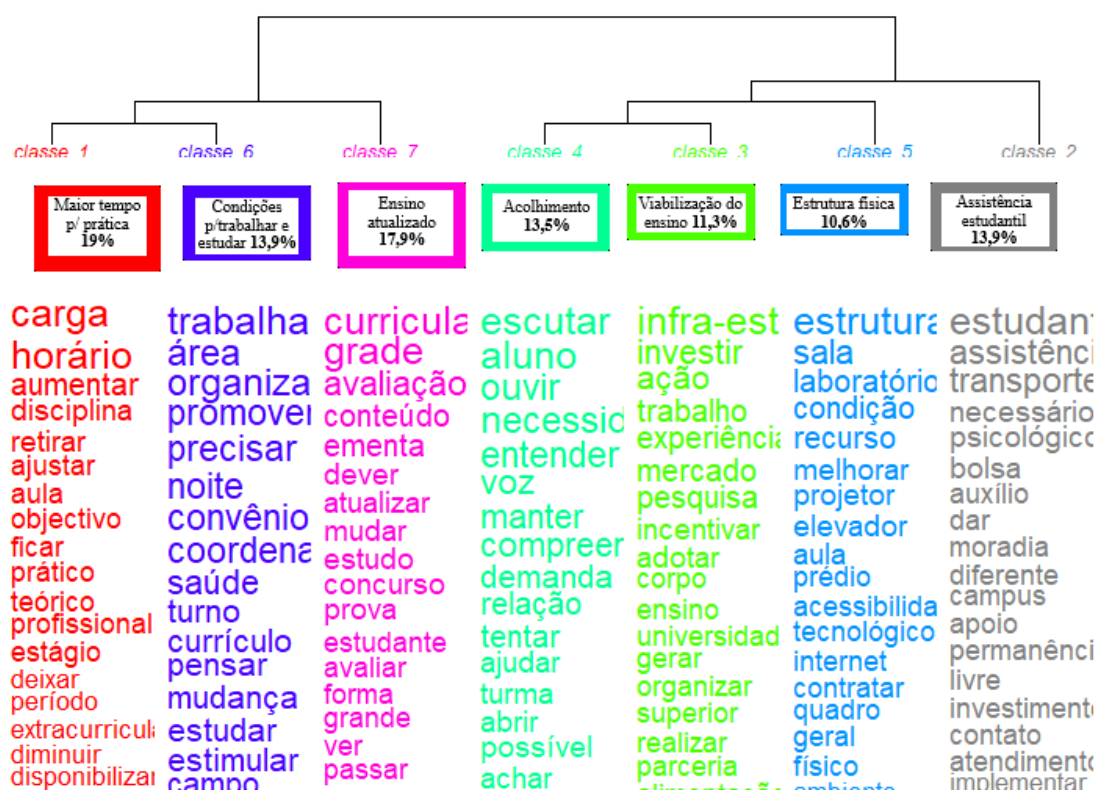
Through the induction of a “dilemma”, we sought to investigate the possible elements related to the quality of teaching inserted in the students’ discourse, observing their context and organization, considering the relationship of these individuals with the university environment,

⁵Here, the reader must refer to the list with the complete criteria, in Figure 1, since in the “maximum tree”, we only find synthetic labels of the aforementioned items.

and the daily experiences and practices in the training process and existing social life. The use of CHD makes it possible to approach the context of thought socialized by the researched group, which, according to Salviati (2017) and Silva (2020), belong to specific mental worlds of representation. For this analysis, the *IRAMUTEQ software* was used (CAMARGO; JUSTO, 2018; SALVIATI, 2017). After collecting the data resulting from the question presented above, the *corpus* was prepared for use in the *software*, following the guidelines presented by the aforementioned authors.

As a result of the application of CHD, the *corpus* was divided into 343 text segments with 79.88% of the segments being used, thus proving acceptable. Thus, of the 343 text segments, 274 were grouped into seven thematic classes as structured in the dendrogram presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – Dendrogram of the Descending Hierarchical Classification of the corpus “if you were Rector, what would you do to improve the course?”



Source: created by the authors using the *IRAMUTEQ software*

Initially, the *corpus* was divided into two blocks, the first consisting of Classes 1, 6 and 7; which we call “Course Reorganization”, the meaning of which is to reorganize to provide conditions for the student and favor “up-to-date” teaching (in relation to the market and professional practices); and a second block, composed of Classes 4, 3, 5, and 2, called “Student

Attention and Professional Practices”, whose meaning is actions that better welcome students, an organization of activities that allows good participation and the need focus of training on learning professional practices. The analyzes by class are presented below:

Class 1. Greater Time for Practice (19%). It appears to be the most representative of the *corpus*, with 19%. Here it was interpreted that, for the subjects, improving the course means providing more hours dedicated to practical classes, with flexible schedules for internships, aiming for greater contact with the professional reality. Below are some typical illustrative phrases from the speeches.

The workload of practical and professional practice-oriented subjects would increase (SUBJECT 237).

The workload of activities aimed at professional practice would increase (SUBJECT 239).

The workload needs to be better distributed with more practical subjects that are of greater interest to students in order to complete the course (SUBJECT 151).

Class 6. Conditions for Working and Studying (13.9%). For these subjects, it represents the need to organize and adjust the course curriculum in order to consider the possibility of shifts, allowing working students greater conditions to study, especially in courses that currently operate full-time.

Evening classes for poor students, who need to work, may ultimately have the right to participate in classes (SUBJECT 139).

I would offer more subjects and practical classes at night thinking about students who need to work during the day (SUBJECT 261).

It would make the workload more compatible with reality because most of the time the student needs to work and study (SUBJECT 245).

Class 7. Updated teaching (17.9%). It was the second most representative class. For subjects in this class, improving the course is associated with a more up-to-date, flexible curriculum, consistent with professional training, and which can be enriching in terms of content for the course. For students, this must be continually updated, as stated by subject 266: “it would improve the grade by making it more up to date”. Subject 271 (area 05) states that “he would change the curriculum by adopting new subjects to enrich the course”.

Class 4. Reception (13.5%). A set of reports was observed that also focused on student demands, however, for this group, these would be related to the need for “welcome” by the institution in relation to relational issues, that is, aspects experienced by students in the relationship constituted between students and teachers, or educational institution. Therefore, they would be more subjective aspects, involved in emotional and behavioral issues. Next, some

illustrations are presented that demonstrate this understanding: “I would listen more to students to understand their dynamics and difficulties, making the course a welcoming and more inclusive environment for everyone” (subject 210), “I would create a support program for students to help and motivate them to complete the course, to listen to their complaints and difficulties. I would be completely strict with intolerant teachers who do not do their job properly, who morally harass students” (subject 250).

Class 3. Good Course Functioning (11.30%). It was so named because it groups issues that involve the organization and improvement of teaching through the hiring of experienced teachers, maintenance of inputs for practical classes, investment in the quality of teaching, actions aimed at interaction between the university and the job market, institutional partnerships, among others, as presented in the next reports: “I would improve the availability of inputs for practical classes” (subject 247), and “I would invest in hiring more teachers because in my opinion the major problem with the course currently is the overload of available teachers, creating a shortage quality of teaching” (subject 212).

Class 5. Physical Structure (10.6%). It groups the meaning attributed by the subjects that improvement is related to the good conditions of classrooms, laboratories, equipment, technological resources, adequate spaces, physical infrastructure, rooms with technology available, conservation of buildings, desks, elevators, among others. The report presented below illustrates the observation above: “it would offer better infrastructure conditions, including classrooms with sufficient tables and chairs, refrigeration, a projector and a working computer” (subject 278). Likewise, subject 222 states that “he would take care of the infrastructure with more suitable rooms and better chairs, buy new paintings for the rooms, install projectors, internet and carry out maintenance on the elevators.

Class 2. Student Assistance (13.9%). This class represents the students' understanding that improving the course in the dean's position would mean paying attention to student support related to integrative activities, university transportation, university restaurant, financial aid such as scholarships, teaching materials, and housing. In this class, there is a sharing of the idea of support that allows the student to maintain themselves (in the sense of sustenance and other related aspects) during the university training process. This perception is reflected in the following reports: “it would increase student assistance, making it easier for students to stay, as it is practically impossible to survive without being able to work since the course is full-time” (subject 056), and “ it would improve student retention projects such as scholarships and aid mainly” (subject 042).

The set of meanings circulating in the classes seems to point in two directions that organize the field of discourses raised by the dilemma in relation to the quality of higher education, aiming at a totality, the university and its possible actions to improve the quality of the course. The first direction can be interpreted as a “broad reorganization of the course”, aiming for three consequences or actions: reorganizing to ensure a greater workload (time) of subjects for “practical activities” linked to learning the profession; reorganize to provide “better conditions” for students (especially those who work) to attend classes and study, and this in order to make the curriculum more flexible, offering a wider and more flexible schedule and activities; finally, the “teaching update” in the sense of updating the syllabus and preparing the student for the future exercise of the profession and opportunities in the job market.

A second direction of “Good functioning of the course, student demands and needs”, in the direction of four consequences and processes: in the speeches we find the need for the course to “listen” to students, understand their needs and demands. Evidently, this demand for “welcome” is not only presented in the action of “listening” or creating channels of expression, but rather that the course identifies the real needs and carries out actions to meet the needs to become a quality professional.

It is about “listening” to the student in relation to the professional profile that the market requires and that will allow or ensure entry into this market; linked to the first element, there is a demand for better “student assistance”, in this case aimed at students with less social support or greater vulnerability, that is, seeking aid and services, such as scholarships, transport, food, housing and psychological support; a third element consists of several actions to “maintain and improve” teaching activities, such as hiring teachers with experience in the job market, investments, ensuring the maintenance of inputs for practical classes, creation and maintenance of partnerships with entities of society, especially work organizations.

As the fourth and final element composing this direction, we find the demand for “better infrastructure”: conservation of buildings (including elevators and bathrooms) and facilities, recovery of classrooms (chairs, computers, projectors, etc.), expansion of “technological resources”, especially internet access.

Discussion

We can raise an interpretative hypothesis about a “system of representational elements”, linked to different representations (in this case the focus was on the course, teaching and the university), to constitute a students' view of the 'quality of higher education'. We remember that the subjects were asked about the “quality of their course”, the “quality of teaching” based on their experiences as students and about how the university could “improve” the course (in the form of a dilemma). The results of each question, although analyzed separately, reverberate on each other, both prospectively and retrospectively, allowing the identification of the field's organizing or structuring elements (probably central or first peripheral) and pointing to the most consensual meanings of each element, its specifications, proper meanings, directions. The first question, of evocations, takes the student to a cognitive work of, spontaneously, evoking what is most relevant to him, within the limit of expressing it in words or expressions; the second question requests a cognitive operation of evaluation (judgment) and selection, among more elaborate items (since their formulations are extracted from the base criteria of a central agent in the public policy for evaluating the quality of higher education) that the production of previous question; and the third question requests selection (the “most important”), linked to the group's values and argumentation. The CHD results provide us with “clarification” about the deep meanings of the elements highlighted in the answers to the previous questions.

Thus, it seems consistent with our results to propose that the “representation” of the quality of higher education (the result of a system of elements linked to a set of social representations of other objects), in the subjects researched, is organized into around the expectations of what Quality Professional Training would be, and consequently, the mobilization of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the training received up until the moment of collection. Five representational elements can be identified, which, in their interaction, indicate an expected “quality teaching” profile; in analogy, we can speak of “the most important criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching”.

1) Based on the analysis of the evocations, the “Infrastructure” element stands out in all analyses: firstly in terms of recovering and maintaining the facilities (rooms, boards, computers, projectors, elevators, walls, bathrooms); secondly, to recover and reorganize the library and VLE (virtual learning environments); third, expand access to the internet and other technological resources (it is worth remembering that more than two thirds of the sample is made up of courses with a strong “technical” nature, in the areas of health and agricultural

sciences, therefore dependent on current equipment and technology), in addition to maintain (guarantee inputs and technology) and “update” the laboratories”;

2) the need for a greater “Focus on Professional Practices” in teaching already appears prominently in the evocations in the expression “practical classes” and gains more strength in the maximum tree, of which one of the two structuring poles is the “internships” element; In relation to this element, all results are convergent, indicating a strong consensuality; in CHD, represented especially, but not exclusively, by Classes 1 (more time for practice) and 7 (updated teaching), this element points to dissatisfaction and the demand (not heard, not accepted) for more learning of practices and learning in tune with current times and the “regional demands of the profession”;

3) another element highlighted in the three analyzes is that the course has “Qualified Teachers”; which appears as the fourth most frequent evocation, and has its importance specified in the maximum tree, either as “teachers with experience in the professional market”, or as “teachers with experience in higher education”, strongly linked to “internships”; at CHD it appears associated with the block that refers to the “good functioning of the course and student demands” (Classes 3 and 5), in the forms of “teachers with market and teaching experience” and “hiring teachers with experience in Marketplace”;

4) a fourth element, which appears in the first periphery, that is, relevant, but not central, and is highlighted in the similarity analysis and reinforced in the CHD, is what we generically call “Welcoming the Student’s Demands and Needs”, which considers inclusion and student assistance, in a more restricted sense, but goes far beyond them; It is more significantly a “plea” to be heard, in the modalities of listening, services (student assistance) and effective participation in collegiate bodies, pointing to the affirmation of a “vision” or conception about the professional profile that they students want to be trained and the distance between this and the reality of the course;

5) a last identified element, appearing prominently in all analyses, but with lower consensuality than the previous ones, is what we call “Pedagogical Project Compatible with the Professional Profile”, which appears as relevant in the analysis of the evocations in the form of “organization of the course”, “curriculum”, appears as an item with the same title and also, in the item “active collegiate with student representation”, both with an intense connection with “technological resources” and clearly visible in Block 1 (Classes 1, 6 and 7) the dendrogram; It does not seem untenable to us to propose that this element seems to convey as its central meaning the idea of a profound reorganization of the course, to guarantee coherence with a

professional profile, which, in the students' sense, must be updated, technological and in tune with the regional demands of the profession.

Conclusion

In general, it was verified, through the instruments applied and the reports of the subjects participating in the research, the perception of a consensual universe in relation to the issue of teaching quality, through factors related to the course and the university in which the individuals are inserted. The possible structure is formed around the elements: infrastructure, practical classes, student assistance, qualified teachers, and organization. However, this study cannot cover the entire complexity of the representational field linked to teaching quality. Therefore, it is suggested that other studies be carried out that could cover new groups, such as students from the private sector, as well as the teaching staff of these institutions.

The findings of this study must be discussed in light of the profile of the sample researched, with a strong “technical” emphasis on the courses studied; and also in dialogue with the recent historical context of processes of degradation of the operating conditions of universities, considering the economic crisis of recent years, and the direction of public policies aimed at higher education, by the federal government between 2019 and 2021, of devaluation of universities. Another component of contextualization of the representational elements found refers to the recognition of a historical difficulty of more structural links between the university and society, in this case, particularly the difficulty of keeping up with transformations (accelerated in many areas in recent years, given the rapid technological advancement) of professional practices and labor market needs.

Thus, as proposed by Cunha (2014), understanding the quality of teaching through other elements is urgent for a social and academic contribution, so that we can move towards a more coherent meaning of this object for students, teachers and governments, so that, as Dias Sobrinho proposes, (2012) “contribute to a fair and developed society”. This was the aim of this study when investigating quality from the perspective of university students in Brazilian public education.

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