

## Research Articles

# The social representations of physical education teachers about the new high school: an analysis from the tree of similitude

As representações sociais de professores de educação física sobre o novo ensino médio: uma análise a partir da árvore de similitude

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**HOW TO CITE:** STANELE, W.; TRIANI, F. S. The social representations of physical education teachers about the new high school: an analysis from the tree of similitude. **Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação**, Araraquara, v. 20, e19242, 2025. e-ISSN: 1982-5587. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21723/riaee.v20i00.1924202>

## Abstract

This study explores the social representations of Physical Education teachers in Alagoas regarding the New Secondary Education, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities arising from the 2017 Secondary Education Reform. It is a qualitative and exploratory research that uses the Free Word Association Technique to analyze how these changes impact teaching practices and the place of Physical Education in the curriculum. The results, evidenced through a similarity tree, highlight “Challenge”, “Innovation”, and “Training” as central concepts in the teachers’ social representations. There is an urgent need for adequate infrastructure, as well as political and institutional support for innovative pedagogical practices. The study concludes that, despite the challenges, the Reform also represents an opportunity to reinvent and strengthen Physical Education, which requires investment in infrastructure and continuous teacher training.

**Keywords:** Education; Physical Education; Secondary Education; Social Representations.

## Resumo

Este estudo explora as representações sociais de professores de Educação Física em Alagoas sobre o Novo Ensino Médio, enfatizando os desafios e oportunidades decorrentes da Reforma do Ensino Médio de 2017. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória, que utiliza a Técnica da Associação Livre de Palavras para analisar como tais mudanças impactam a prática pedagógica e o lugar da Educação Física no currículo. Os resultados, evidenciados por meio de uma árvore de similitude, apontam “Desafio”, “Inovação” e “Formação” como conceitos centrais nas representações sociais dos docentes. Identifica-se uma necessidade urgente de infraestrutura adequada, bem como de apoio político e institucional às práticas pedagógicas inovadoras. Conclui-se que, apesar dos desafios, a Reforma representa também uma oportunidade para reinventar e fortalecer a Educação Física, exigindo, para isso, investimentos em infraestrutura e formação docente continuada.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação; Educação Física; Ensino Médio; Representações Sociais.

## INTRODUCTION

The Reform of Secondary Education in Brazil, instituted by Law No. 13,415 of 2017, brought about curricular changes aimed at modernising education and aligning it with contemporary student needs. Among the proposed modifications were the flexibilization of the curriculum and the introduction of educational pathways, which sought to provide a more personalised education oriented towards preparing students for the world of work. However, these changes sparked debates regarding their practical effects, particularly concerning Physical Education and the social representations constructed by teachers working at this stage of Basic Education.

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**Submitted:** April 21, 2024

**Reviewed:** May 15, 2025

**Approved:** June 02, 2025

**Financial support:** This study was funded by FAPERJ - Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Process SEI-260003/013172/2024.

**Conflicts of interest:** There are no conflicts of interest.

**Ethics committee approval:** CAAE: 71680723.8.0000.5255

**Data availability:** Not applicable.

Study conducted at Universidade Estácio de Sá (UNESA), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.



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Although Law No. 13.415/2017 was revised by Law No. 14.945/2024, its effects persist and continue to significantly influence teaching practices, highlighting the ongoing nature of the curricular transition process. In this context, Physical Education, historically marginalised within curricular spaces, faces new challenges and opportunities in asserting its relevance as a fundamental component of students' holistic development. The need to reassess and strengthen its role emerges not only from persistent structural gaps but also from its potential to promote meaningful physical practices.

This study focuses on the social representations built by Physical Education teachers in response to these transformations, justified by the importance of giving visibility to their voices, experiences, concerns, and suggestions. Understanding these representations considering the changes introduced by the 2017 reform — and later reconfigured by the 2024 legislation — contributes to the development of more inclusive and school-life-sensitive educational policies, especially within the state public education network of Alagoas.

Recent studies have reinforced the importance of investigating how teachers perceive and respond to reformist educational policies. Research such as that of Silveira, Silva and Oliveira (2021), Rodrigues and Ferreira (2021), Jeffreys et al. (2018), Toniato et al. (2023), Silva (2022), and Costa (2024) highlight the tensions between official proposals and the concrete conditions of teaching work, particularly in areas such as Physical Education, often relegated to a secondary position in curricular guidelines.

In view of this, the aim of this study is to analyse the social representations of Physical Education teachers in the state public education network of Alagoas regarding the New Secondary Education model, based on data collected during the period when the reform established by Law No. 13.415/2017 was in effect. This investigation seeks to contribute to the understanding of how curricular changes impact pedagogical practices from the teachers' perspective. Thus, the analysis of social representations becomes essential to comprehend the dynamics of acceptance, resistance, and adaptation in the face of curricular demands stemming from a reform process initiated in 2017, later revised in 2024, and still shaping today's educational landscape.

## METHOD

This article adopted a qualitative approach, which, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2006), focuses on the in-depth interpretation of phenomena within their natural contexts, highlighting the personal meanings individuals attribute to them. Vieira and Zouain (2005) stress the importance of participants' accounts, considering their discourses and the meanings they express. This qualitative focus aims to provide detailed descriptions of phenomena and their surrounding aspects, seeking a contextualised understanding.

The qualitative perspective allows for embracing the complexity and naturalness of social situations, enabling access to the real conditions under which the studied phenomena are produced and experienced. This approach facilitates the exploration of social dynamics with richness and multifaceted depth, which is particularly relevant when studying social representations (Wachelke; Camargo, 2007).

Furthermore, this is an exploratory study, which, as Gil (2008) explains, seeks to uncover new ideas and insights, promoting greater familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. According to Augusto et al. (2013), the main objective of this type of research is to develop, clarify, and refine concepts and ideas, thereby establishing a solid foundation for future theoretical formulations.

As a data collection instrument, the Free Word Association Technique (FWAT) was employed, aiming to identify teachers' social representations regarding the educational reform in question. As Ortiz, Triani and Magalhães Júnior (2023) note, this is an effective method for accessing the symbolic universe of individuals and groups through spontaneous associations made in response to an inducing term — which may be a word, phrase, or concept. The FWAT makes it possible to identify patterns, relationships, and structures of meaning among the terms evoked, distinguishing central and peripheral elements that compose the structure of social representations (Triani et al., 2019).

The sample group consisted of Physical Education teachers working within the context of the New Secondary Education model in state public schools in Alagoas. Data collection took place

during the period in which the reform instituted by Law No. 13.415/2017 was in effect. The selection aimed to include diverse pedagogical experiences related to the implementation and execution of the reform, covering different regions and schools across the state. Alagoas is divided into 13 Regional Education Management offices and has approximately 450 Physical Education teachers.

During the completion of the FWAT, teachers were given the expression “Physical Education in the New Secondary Education” as the inducing term and were instructed to record the first five words or expressions that came to mind. The first corresponded to the most important, and the last to the least relevant, allowing for the identification of a subjective hierarchy of meanings attributed. This procedure provided access to the cognitive structures guiding teachers’ perceptions and actions in response to the implemented curricular changes.

Data collection was conducted via Google Forms, an online tool widely used in research due to its convenience and adaptability in creating forms and questionnaires. The data were automatically organised into spreadsheets, facilitating subsequent analysis. The form began with the presentation of the Informed Consent Form (ICF), ensuring participants the freedom to participate and the right to withdraw at any time.

Initially, consideration was given to distributing the questionnaire via email, but a more direct approach was chosen: the use of WhatsApp and individual phone contacts. This strategy significantly increased teacher engagement and allowed clarification of any doubts regarding the purpose and importance of the research. The more personal communication proved decisive for the success of data collection, resulting in the participation of 105 teachers.

The collected data formed a solid basis for similarity analysis, carried out using the Iramuteq software. This tool enabled the construction of a Similarity Tree aimed at understanding teachers’ social representations of the changes introduced by the reform. As Ortiz, Triani and Magalhães Júnior (2023) explain, similarity analysis is based on Graph Theory, which examines the frequency of co-occurrence of the terms evoked. In this technique, not only are individual words analysed, but also the frequency with which they appear in association with other evocations from the same participant.

In the resulting graphical representation, the thickness of the lines (edges) indicates the strength of similarity — that is, how frequently two terms were co-evoked — while the size of the circles (vertices) represents the total frequency of each term across the entire sample. This enables the visualisation of each term’s centrality and conceptual salience within the constructed network.

Below is an illustrative example (Chart 1 and Figure 1), based on simulated data:

Concept “A” was evoked five times; “C”, four times; “B” and “D”, twice;

**Chart 1.** Example of occurrences.

	Evoked concept 1	Evoked concept 2	Evoked concept 3
Person 1	A	B	C
Person 2	E	C	A
Person 3	A	D	B
Person 4	C	D	A
Person 5	A	C	F

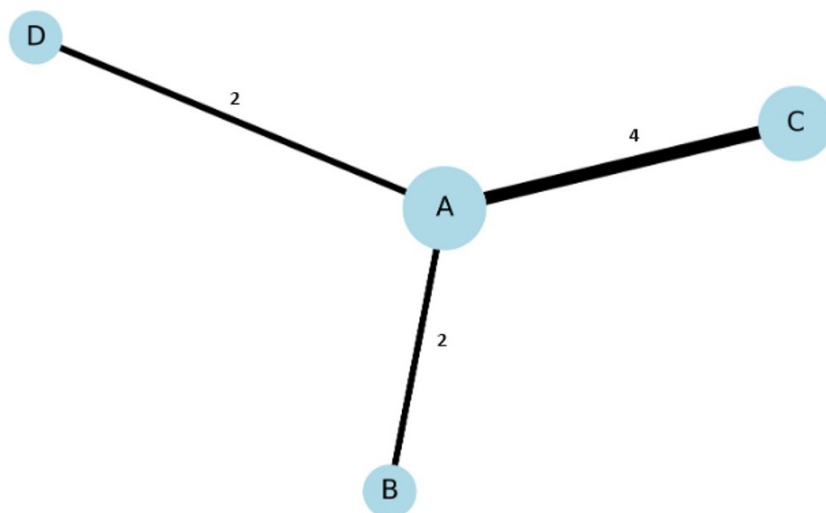
**Font:** Adapted from Ortiz, Triani and Magalhães Júnior (2023).

Co-occurrences were: A+C (4 times); A+B (2 times); A+D (2 times);

The thickest line between “A” and “C” indicates the highest co-occurrence frequency;

The size of the vertices indicates the overall frequency of each term in the sample.

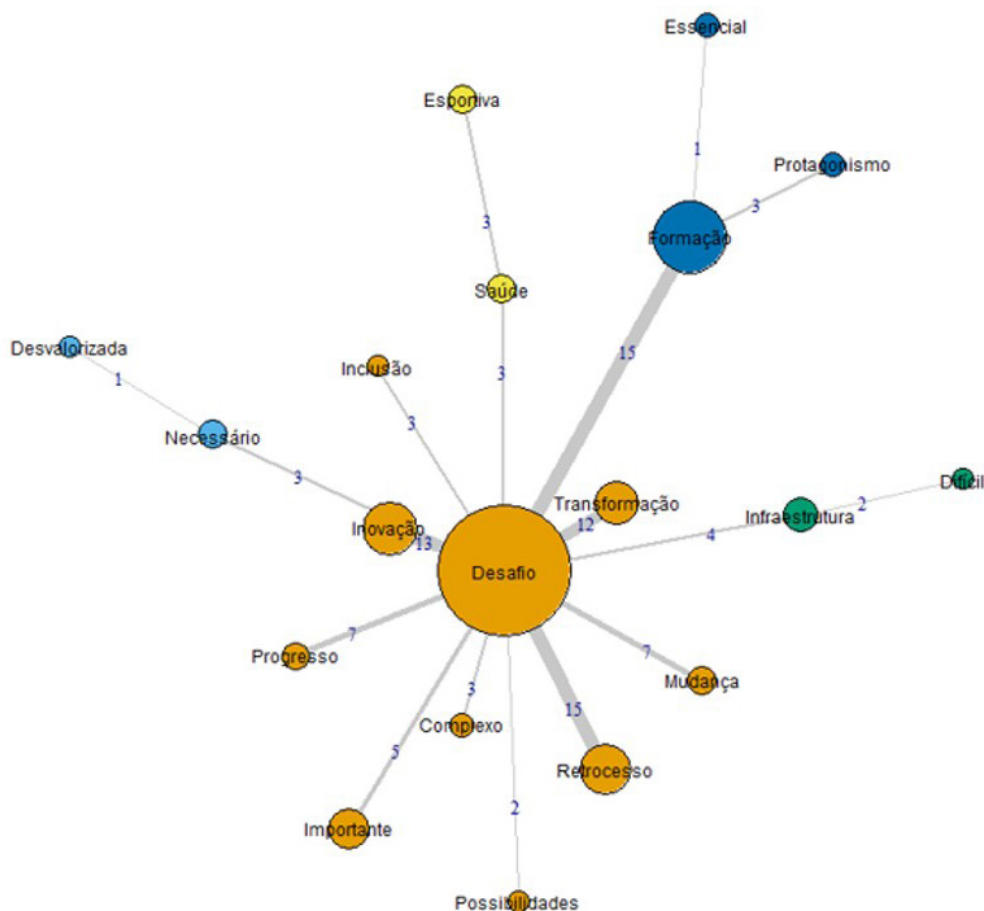
This visual model enabled, in the actual analysis, the interpretation of the most frequent concepts and their interrelations, composing the symbolic structure of the social representations held by Physical Education teachers in Alagoas regarding the New Secondary Education model.



**Figure 1.** Vertices and edges of the similitude network A, B, C and D.  
**Font:** Adapted from Ortiz, Triani and Magalhães Júnior (2023).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this research are presented through a similarity tree (Figure 2), a graphical tool widely used in qualitative data analysis to represent the relationships between different terms evoked, based on their co-occurrence within the set of responses.



**Figure 2.** Graphical representation of the similarity tree based on the evocations of the teachers surveyed.  
**Source:** Prepared by Iramutec based on research data.

At the centre of the tree stands the node identified as “Challenge”, which emerges as the central concept within the teachers’ social representations. From this core, connections radiate outwards to other concepts, forming a structured semantic network. Each line (or edge) connecting the nodes represents the co-occurrence of terms, with the thickness of the line proportional to the strength of that association — the thicker the line, the higher the frequency of co-evocation between the terms.

This structure allows for a detailed reading of the connections between the most meaningful elements for the research participants, revealing the underlying cognitive organisation behind their interpretations of the New Secondary Education model. By analysing the centrality and connections between “Challenge” and other concepts, it becomes possible to understand the social representations constructed by Physical Education teachers in the context of the curricular reform’s implementation. This perception aligns with the findings of Silveira, Silva and Oliveira (2021), who highlight how recent curricular reforms have been experienced with tension by teachers, often subjected to what they describe as a form of “curricular violence” imposed by centralised policies disconnected from the realities of schools.

Considering the interweaving of “Challenge” and “Innovation”, with 13 co-occurrences, it becomes evident that innovation emerges as a response to the challenges imposed by the educational reform, particularly concerning Physical Education within the New Secondary Education framework. Pedagogical innovation is not merely an aspiration but has become a necessity in today’s educational landscape, aiming to meet the dynamic needs of students and the demands of a curriculum continuously reshaped by legal mandates and market pressures.

The need for innovation is underscored by Molina Neto et al. (2017), who argue that in the context of Physical Education, innovation is more than necessary given the reconfiguration of Secondary Education, which now places stronger emphasis on workforce preparation — often at the expense of valuing bodily practices.

The secondary connection between “Innovation” and “Necessary”, with three co-occurrences, may suggest shared social representations among teachers, indicating that innovation is not merely beneficial or desirable, but an essential element within the context of educational reform. This link also suggests a recognition that traditional approaches are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of a constantly evolving curriculum, with innovation being regarded as crucial for the advancement and adaptation of Physical Education.

The connection between “Challenge”, “Innovation”, and “Necessary” implies that educators view innovation as an indispensable requirement for improving their teaching practices. It represents an urgent call to action, demanding a pedagogical response that is not only immediate but also capable of preparing students for an uncertain and ever-changing future.

The emphasis on innovation as a necessity aligns with the arguments of Corrêa, Thiesen and Hentz (2022), as well as those of Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017), who highlight the importance of adequate political and institutional support for the transformative potential of educational reforms to be fully realised — especially in disciplines historically subjected to marginalisation, such as Physical Education. This understanding reinforces a perceived consensus regarding the critical importance of innovative approaches in teaching, suggesting that innovation is seen as an essential condition for the transformation and effectiveness of pedagogical practice within the context of Secondary Education.

Although innovation is acknowledged as essential, the weaker connection with the terms “Necessary” and “Undervalued” suggests that, within the teacher community analysed, there remain social representations indicating that pedagogical innovation is not being sufficiently valued or implemented. This is also observed by Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017), who warn that, without appropriate political and institutional support, the transformative potential of educational reforms may fail to materialise fully.

This constitutes a critical reflection challenging the educational community not only to acknowledge the importance of innovation but also to advocate for its effective implementation and recognition within public policy frameworks. The absence of adequate support compromises the achievement of reform objectives and the sustainability of innovative pedagogical practices.

The association between “Challenge” and “Transformation”, with 12 co-occurrences, reflects teachers’ perception that the Secondary Education Reform is not merely an obstacle, but rather a structural shift in educational practices. This transformation is characterised by complexity and a drive to revisit and revitalise Physical Education — a discipline historically marginalised — which now finds itself at a critical turning point.

As highlighted in the literature, particularly by Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017), this perspective underscores the importance of pedagogical innovation while criticising reforms that overlook the intrinsic value of Physical Education. In this regard, Molina Neto et al. (2017) warn that the intended transformation may become superficial if there is no genuine commitment to promoting body culture and holistic student development.

With the implementation of Law No. 13.415/2017 (Brasil, 2017), the curricular flexibility reinforces the need for a “Transformation” that goes beyond adapting to the job market, embracing a broader and more humanistic vision of education. This critique is illustrated in Pires’ (2017) observations when discussing the implications of a reform that prioritises neoliberal orientations and threatens the appreciation of humanistic subjects, such as Physical Education.

In this context, the role of Physical Education teachers is twofold: on one hand, they reformulate their practices to meet new guidelines; on the other, they act as defenders of a curriculum that preserves its commitment to students’ holistic development. Soares (2017) and Neira (2018) reinforce this need for resistance against trends that disregard humanistic traditions and reduce the complexity of Physical Education to merely technical or instrumental approaches.

The connection between “Challenge” and “Teacher Training”, with 15 co-occurrences, reveals a critical understanding of the Secondary Education Reform and its impacts on Physical Education. Teacher training emerges as a structuring axis, indicating an urgent need to develop competencies that respond to the new curricular and methodological demands imposed by Law No. 13.415/2017 (Brasil, 2017) and the National Common Curricular Base (Brasil, 2018). Rodrigues and Ferreira (2021) stress that teacher education, especially in specific knowledge areas, has been neglected during reform processes, undermining the implementation of changes in everyday school life.

Studies by Corrêa, Thiesen and Hentz (2022), Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017), and Souza and Ramos (2017) indicate that rather than expanding the educational scope, the reform tends to orient education towards market logic, to the detriment of disciplines committed to human, critical, and integral formation.

The flexibility in curricular organisation has resulted in consequences such as the devaluation and precariousness of Physical Education teaching, demanding an urgent rethinking of teacher training. Molina Neto et al. (2017) warn about the possibility of “outsourcing” school-based Physical Education, replacing systematic instruction with unstructured sports activities led by professionals without specific pedagogical training — a process that represents an erosion of humanistic curricular traditions. Silva (2022) highlights that the full-time schooling policy, implemented rapidly within the reform context, often lacks infrastructure and planning, questioning its effectiveness in achieving intended educational goals.

This scenario challenges educators to provide formative responses capable of meeting contemporary demands. Such training must include both a critical understanding of educational policies and continuous improvement of pedagogical practice, ensuring an approach aligned with students’ holistic development. Corrêa, Thiesen and Hentz (2022) and Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017) reinforce that effective educational policies require not only curricular changes but also concrete investments in teacher education and appreciation.

Focusing on “Teacher Training” also highlights the need to create a curriculum that engages with young people’s expectations and needs, rather than solely responding to market imperatives. This implies adopting a critical and reflective approach capable of valuing the contributions of Physical Education to students’ physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development.

By integrating these perspectives, the importance of solid and ongoing teacher education becomes evident — one that prepares educators to transform challenges into opportunities



for pedagogical innovation and professional growth. Thus, “Teacher Training” should not be understood merely as a reaction to difficulties imposed by the reform, but as a prerequisite for high-quality, meaningful public education.

By analysing the connections between “Challenge” and “Teacher Training”, along with related terms such as “Agency” and “Essential”, we observe a dialogue with the current dynamics of the Secondary Education Reform. Teacher education is seen not only as a response to challenges but as a fundamental element in equipping teachers to lead educational transformation. The relationship between “Teacher Training” and “Agency” underscores the importance of preparing educators who not only transmit knowledge but also foster in students the capacity to become active agents of their own learning, as suggested by Alves and Miguel (2021).

In this analysis, it becomes clear that Physical Education can and must serve as a driver of pedagogical innovation and curricular development within the context of the New Secondary Education model. Teachers’ desire to move forward and believe in the possibility of progress reflects the importance of a holistic approach to Physical Education — one that includes its contribution to students’ physical, cognitive, emotional, and social well-being (Gariglio; Almeida Junior; Oliveira, 2017).

Thus, the observed links between “Challenge”, “Teacher Training”, “Agency”, and “Essential” highlight the role of teacher education in the successful implementation of educational reforms. It suggests that effective educational policies must support and prioritise continuous teacher development, enabling educators to face contemporary educational challenges with confidence and competence, and maintaining Physical Education as a dynamic and essential component of the school curriculum.

The strong connection between “Challenge” and “Backward Step”, with 15 co-occurrences in the similarity tree, reveals a marked tension between the declared objectives of the Secondary Education Reform and the social representations held by Physical Education teachers. Despite the official discourse of modernisation and alignment with the job market, many teachers perceive the reform as a setback for the discipline, further marginalising its presence in the curriculum in favour of subjects like Mathematics and Portuguese.

This backward step is not merely rhetorical. It manifests concretely in the reduction of Physical Education class hours across various states and in structural limitations faced in schools, such as the lack of appropriate facilities and scarce resources. These conditions directly compromise the quality and diversity of pedagogical practices. Molina Neto et al. (2017) and Bungenstab and Lazzarotti Filho (2017) warn of the risk of “outsourcing” the subject, replacing systematic teaching with sporadic activities conducted by individuals lacking proper pedagogical qualifications — a process that favours so-called “noted expertise” at the expense of formal teacher education. Tonieto et al. (2023) point out that the restructuring of teaching work driven by the reform has generated overload and precarious working conditions, hindering teachers’ engagement with innovative proposals, and compromising professional performance.

Additionally, authors such as Novaes et al. (2020) highlight the risk of Physical Education becoming an optional or purely theoretical component — a serious misalignment with the principles of holistic education. This would undermine not only motor development but also the cognitive and socio-emotional aspects that the discipline is capable of fostering.

Considering this scenario, pedagogical innovation becomes even more urgent, as highlighted by Alves and Miguel (2021), who advocate for continuing teacher education as a strategy to overcome adversity and propose creative solutions. Corrêa, Thiesen and Hentz (2022) add that student learning quality may be significantly compromised when reforms prioritise market-driven logic over a humanistic and formative perspective.

This ambiguity of the reform — which proposes curricular flexibility in the name of modernisation, yet in practice may result in casualization — reinforces the need for resistance and reaffirmation of the value of Physical Education as an essential part of the school curriculum. It involves recognising that the challenge imposed on teachers goes beyond technical adaptation: it requires a critical stance towards policies that threaten education’s humanising role.

In the similarity tree, the connection between “Challenge” and “Progress”, with seven co-occurrences, suggests a relationship between the challenges posed by educational reforms and teachers’ efforts to improve their pedagogical practices. This interconnection demonstrates a willingness among teachers to transform structural limitations into opportunities for professional growth and the development of Physical Education within the context of the New Secondary Education model.

This view of transforming challenges into opportunities for progress aligns with the reflections of Alves and Miguel (2021), who highlight the importance of continuing teacher education in teaching and learning processes. It also resonates with the principles advocated by Freire (1996), who emphasises teacher autonomy and the critical role of education in promoting citizenship and transformative thinking.

Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017) reinforce this idea, stating that the reform challenges teachers to reconsider their practices considering curricular flexibility. Although this flexibility has been promoted as a solution to issues such as school dropout rates, it raises concerns regarding the integrity and status of Physical Education within the curriculum. Jeffreys et al. (2018), in analysing the implementation of the New Secondary Education model in Amazonas, demonstrate that, in practice, curricular flexibility does not always translate into greater student engagement — especially in contexts where resources and proper planning are lacking.

Physical Education teachers committed to students’ holistic development recognise challenges as central but also envision possibilities for advancement. The centrality of the term “Challenge” within the structure of social representations highlights this tension. The presence of “Progress” indicates an underlying horizon of improvement, albeit still distant. This represents cautious optimism — one that acknowledges the difficulties imposed by the reform while also recognising Physical Education’s capacity to reinvent itself and remain relevant.

This understanding underscores the importance of public policies that support innovative pedagogical practices through investments in infrastructure, continuous professional development, and teacher appreciation. In this way, it becomes possible to ensure that curricular reform proposals truly result in tangible improvements for the teaching of Physical Education and the educational process.

The connection between “Challenge” and “Change”, with seven co-occurrences in the similarity tree, reveals an ambiguous narrative: the New Secondary Education Reform is perceived simultaneously as an obstacle and as an opportunity. This ambivalence reflects the tensions experienced by Physical Education teachers, who acknowledge the inevitability of change yet express uncertainties regarding its concrete effects.

This interpretation is supported by authors such as Novaes et al. (2020) and Souza and Ramos (2017), who had already pointed out the marginalisation of Physical Education even before the reform was implemented — a condition that intensified following its execution.

Corrêa, Thiesen and Hentz (2022) note that the impacts of the reform on students’ cognitive and motor development must be carefully assessed, as poorly structured curricular changes may compromise the quality of education offered.

On the other hand, Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017) suggest that, despite being driven by market interests, the reform could open space for pedagogical innovations in Physical Education — provided there is investment and willingness to listen to education professionals.

Thus, the relationship between “Challenge” and “Change” mirrors a process of forced adaptation, in which teachers must balance overcoming obstacles with building more coherent and meaningful practices. Such a shift requires policies that acknowledge the complexity of public schooling and value teacher participation in curriculum redesign.

The association between “Challenge” and “Important”, with five co-occurrences, expresses teachers’ recognition of the value of Physical Education within the current reform scenario. According to the references consulted, this importance goes beyond physical activity per se, positioning Physical Education as an essential component for students’ holistic development.

Bastos, Santos Júnior and Ferreira (2017) point out that the implementation of the National Common Curricular Base and the New Secondary Education model brought significant



transformations but also triggered tensions concerning the maintenance of a curriculum capable of ensuring autonomous and critical learning.

The presence of the term “Important” linked to “Challenge” shows that, despite adverse conditions — such as reduced class hours and institutional marginalisation — teachers reaffirm the fundamental role of Physical Education in promoting healthy lifestyles, social interaction, and the strengthening of movement-based cultural practices.

This collective perception reinforces that, although affected by curricular changes, Physical Education continues to be seen as indispensable in the formation of complete subjects — individuals capable of understanding, respecting, and transforming the world through movement.

The connection between “Challenge” and “Infrastructure”, with four co-occurrences, highlights structural inadequacies as one of the main barriers to effective pedagogical practice in Physical Education. Teachers acknowledge that without appropriate physical and material conditions, implementing innovative proposals and delivering holistic education, as outlined by the BNCC, becomes unfeasible.

Authors such as Guimarães, Neira and Velardi (2015), Hildebrandt-Stramann (2020), and Santos, Silva and Milan (2022) reinforce this interpretation by highlighting that school infrastructure goes far beyond logistical concerns — it is an integral part of the educational process and crucial to the quality of teaching.

According to Santos, Silva and Milan (2022), deficiencies in school facilities hinder the application of innovative practices, directly compromising the expected advancements from reforms. Guimarães, Neira and Velardi (2015) further note that the absence of suitable spaces affects not only motor development, but also social values and interpersonal relationships built through bodily activities.

Hildebrandt-Stramann (2020) adds that educational policies aiming at more effective Physical Education must necessarily include investments in infrastructure; otherwise, the curricular component risks becoming symbolic and ineffective.

The connections between “Challenge”, “Health” and “Sport-related”, each appearing three times, reinforce the understanding that Physical Education is a strategic discipline for promoting health and sport as educational dimensions. The term “Health” extends beyond disease prevention or physical exercise, expressing a broader concept involving students’ physical, emotional, and social well-being, as highlighted by Guimarães, Neira and Velardi (2015).

Likewise, the link with the term “Sport-related” recalls the value of sport as a social, cultural and educational phenomenon. Soares (2017) argues that school sports should go beyond competition and performance logic, being redefined as formative and inclusive practices. Thus, there is advocacy for the coexistence of “school sport” — compulsory and educational — alongside “sport in school” — optional and interest-driven — both having potential to contribute to social transformation.

The final three words associated with “Challenge” — “Inclusion”, “Complex” and “Possibilities” — reaffirm the interweaving of key dimensions of Physical Education within the context of the New Secondary Education model. The association with “Inclusion”, for example, highlights teachers’ commitment to pedagogical practices that address diversity. This inclusion goes beyond the presence of students with disabilities, encompassing gender, social class, physical ability, and individual interests.

The term “Complex”, also appearing three times, indicates that the challenges faced by teachers are not limited to technical issues but extend across political, structural, and ideological dimensions. Physical Education is influenced by tensions related to its legitimacy, its place in the curriculum, and how it is understood by school management.

Finally, the association between “Challenge” and “Possibilities”, with two co-occurrences, reveals a hopeful outlook among teachers. Despite the difficulties, educators visualise opportunities for pedagogical reconstruction and reinvention. This points to the transformative potential of Physical Education, particularly when it is treated as a field of knowledge rather than merely a physical practice.

However, as previously discussed, these possibilities can only be fully realised if there are investments in infrastructure, teacher appreciation, and openness to teacher agency in curricular formulation. The social representations identified in this study reaffirm that the challenges imposed by the reform do not nullify the potential of Physical Education, but instead highlight the need for objective conditions to allow its full realisation.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the social representations of Physical Education teachers regarding the New Secondary Education model, revealing ideas, challenges, and opportunities in the face of curricular reforms initiated by Law No. 13,415/2017 and reconfigured by Law No. 14.945/2024. Through the Free Word Association Technique and similarity analysis, it was possible to access the symbolic structure constructed by teachers and highlight the centrality of the concepts “Challenge”, “Innovation” and “Teacher Training”.

The research showed that although the reform has been widely represented as a “Challenge”, it has also been framed as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation and reconfiguration of teaching practices — elements that continue to resonate even after the legislative update of 2024. The interconnectedness of these concepts within the social representations reveals teachers’ engagement in critically interpreting the changes and adapting to them, despite structural limitations and ambiguities within educational policies.

The analysis also highlighted the urgent need for investments in school infrastructure, continuing teacher education and institutional support. Physical Education, historically undervalued, emerged as central in teachers’ views as a component promoting health, inclusion, agency, and students’ holistic development.

Teachers appeared not merely as implementers of reforms, but as interpretive agents of public policies, offering resistance and redefining meanings based on their real-world contexts. In this sense, Physical Education can — and should — occupy a prominent place in building more humanistic, critical, and democratic curricular proposals. Costa (2024) questions to what extent teachers feel prepared to collectively construct the proposed educational pathways, suggesting that the successful implementation of such initiatives depends on institutional support, active listening, and continuous teacher training.

It can be concluded that, in teachers’ social representations, the Secondary Education reform was perceived not only as a setback, but also as an opportunity to rethink the role of Physical Education in the curriculum. To achieve this, it is essential to ensure objective working conditions: adequate infrastructure, ongoing teacher training and recognition of the curricular component. These measures are fundamental for any reform proposal — whether from 2017 or its 2024 revision — to respect the diversity of pedagogical practices and contribute to a truly holistic and transformative education.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Does not apply.

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#### Authors contribution

WS: Study conception and design, Data collection, Writing – original draft. FST: Data analysis, Writing – review & editing, Final approval of the article.

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. José Luís Bizelli

Executive Editor: Profa. Dra. Flavia Maria Uehar