

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ASSESSMENT AMONG PRE-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

A ESTRUTURA DAS REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS DA
AVALIAÇÃO ENTRE FUTUROS EDUCADORES DE INFÂNCIA

Marcelo Coppi

Doutor em Ciências da Educação pela Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

Professor Auxiliar Convidado no Departamento de Pedagogia e Educação da Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

E-mail: mcoppi@uevora.pt

Isabel Fialho

Doutora em Ciências da Educação pela Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

Professora Associada no Departamento de Pedagogia e Educação da Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

E-mail: ifialho@uevora.pt

José Saragoça

Doutor em Sociologia pela Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

Professor Associado no Departamento de Pedagogia e Educação da Universidade de Évora (Évora/Portugal).

E-mail: jsaragoca@uevora.pt

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RESUMO

Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar a estrutura e os significados das representações sociais (RS) da avaliação em futuros educadores de infância, identificando e interpretando o seu núcleo central e sistema periférico. Adotando uma abordagem qualitativa e exploratória no âmbito da abordagem estrutural da Teoria das Representações Sociais (TRS), a investigação envolveu 30 estudantes do primeiro ano dos cursos de mestrado em Educação Pré-Escolar e em Educação Pré-Escolar e Ensino do 1.º Ciclo do Ensino Básico da Universidade de Évora. A técnica de associação livre de palavras (TALP) foi aplicada com o termo indutor avaliação, seguida de hierarquização e justificação das evocações. Os dados, lematizados e processados, foram submetidos a análises múltiplas de frequência, prototípica e de similitude, utilizando o software IRaMuTeQ. Os resultados revelaram representações sociais coerentes centradas no elemento aprendizagem, refletindo uma perspetiva formativa da avaliação, associada a um processo contínuo de acompanhamento e apoio ao desenvolvimento da criança, fundamental para informar e regular a prática pedagógica. Em síntese, os futuros educadores de infância internalizaram uma concepção de avaliação profundamente alinhada com os paradigmas contemporâneos da avaliação para a aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Representações sociais. Avaliação. Formação de professores. Estudantes. Educação Pré-escolar.

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the structure and meanings of social representations (SR) of assessment in pre-service early childhood educators, identifying and interpreting their central core and peripheral system. Adopting a qualitative and exploratory approach within the structural framework of the Theory of Social Representations (TSR), the investigation involved 30 first-year students from the master's programs in Preschool Education and Preschool Education and Primary Education at the University of Évora. The free word association technique (FWAT) was administered with the inducing term assessment, followed by hierarchization and justification of the evocations. The data, lemmatized and processed, were subjected to multiple frequency, prototypical, and similitude analyses using IRaMuTeQ software. The results revealed coherent SR centered on the element learning, reflecting a formative perspective of assessment, associated with a continuous process of monitoring and support for child development, fundamental for informing and regulating pedagogical practice. In summary, the pre-service early childhood educators internalized a conception of assessment deeply aligned with contemporary paradigms of assessment for learning.

Keywords: Social representations. Assessment. Teacher training. Students. Preschool education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Educational assessment constitutes a complex and socially constructed phenomenon, historically associated with practices of student classification and selection. Such practices relate to social representations (SR) of assessment anchored in logics of control and measurement, particularly present in higher education (Fialho et al., 2023a, 2023b). In initial teacher training programs, assessment methodologies constitute not only fundamental curricular elements but also implicit models of pedagogical practice that students tend to reproduce in their future professional activity (López-Pastor et al., 2021), sometimes overlapping with the theoretical approaches addressed in training.

In the Portuguese educational system, preschool education and the first four years of basic education are ensured by generalist teachers, whose possess broad training to act in various areas of knowledge. This condition allows their daily permanence with the group/class, creating facilitating conditions for continuous assessment, through systematic and varied processes of collecting and analyzing information about learning pathways (Duarte & Fonseca, 2023).

The Portuguese normative framework aligns with contemporary scientific literature by recognizing formative assessment as the central axis of pedagogical practice, as established in the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education and in Decree-Law No. 55/2018 (Portugal, 2018). However, although the initial training of these teachers is grounded in these guiding documents, students' SR of assessment are strongly influenced by the experiences of their academic path. As the European Commission (2020) notes, "the implementation of formative assessment is a slow process" (p. 44), evidencing that the SR of pre-service educators are not transformed solely through theoretical discourse, but above all through evaluative practices effectively lived and reflected upon throughout initial training.

Assessment, particularly at these levels of education and teaching, constitutes a fundamental pillar for the quality of educational intervention, requiring alignment between normative discourse, pedagogical conceptions, and daily practices. In this sense, "assessment is considered a form of knowledge directed towards action" (Silva et al., 2016, p. 15), underlining its regulatory function. The formative conception focuses on the capacity of assessment to inform the organization of teaching actions and support professional reflection.

This approach, which has been consolidated, rejects the classificatory and selective logic, focusing the monitoring and understanding of the child's/student's learning and development processes. As the European Commission (2020) states, "primary school education in Europe is moving away from grading and increasingly focusing on individual feedback, descriptive assessment and reporting, along with more open and collaborative teaching" (p. 25).

In this sense, knowing the SR of pre-service early childhood educators will enable an understanding of the mechanisms by which social factors influence the educational process. If teaching is represented as transmission and control, traditional models will tend to be reproduced. On the other hand, if it is represented as mediation, inclusion, and development, more reflective pedagogical practices will most likely be favored.

Regarding assessment, the neglect of its socially attributed meanings may compromise the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogical strategies. Conversely, problematizing the SR that associate it predominantly with the logic of selection and classification can contribute to the construction of evaluative practices oriented towards the recognition of individual progress and the valorization of the diversity of learning pathways (UNESCO, 2017).

Articulating the contributions of pedagogical assessment with the field of SR, it is understood that the conceptions of assessment held by pre-service early childhood educators are socially shared, historically constructed, and strongly influenced by the evaluative experiences lived throughout their academic trajectory. Analyzing these representations allows for the interpretation of the meanings attributed to assessment and the identification of possible tensions between theoretical discourses and effectively consolidated practices.

Thus, the objective of this study was to analyze the structure of the SR of pre-service early childhood educators regarding assessment, seeking to interpret the meanings attributed to this phenomenon.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The concept of formative assessment, introduced by Scriven (1967), established the distinction between summative assessment, oriented towards results, and formative assessment, oriented towards the improvement of educational processes. This distinction recognized assessment as a continuous process, in contrast to a vision of assessment as a punctual event.

Subsequent research by Black e William (1998) deepened this debate by introducing the concept of assessment for learning, arguing that formative assessment should be integrated into teaching practices and that teachers and students should use evidence of learning to guide pedagogical decisions. Similarly, Boud (2000) highlighted that evaluative practices exert influence on the way students learn and perceive themselves as learners, suggesting that the evaluative experiences lived contribute to the construction of SR that tend to be reproduced.

Alongside the dissemination of theoretical discourses favorable to formative assessment and evidence confirming its positive effects on learning (Fernandes, 2010), representations anchored in traditional school experiences persist (López-Pastor & Pérez-Pueyo, 2017), which associate assessment with practices of classification, control, and power, marked by the centrality of the grade and the selective function.

In preschool education, assessment assumes a markedly formative nature, as it is essentially a continuous and interpretive process that is more interested in processes than in results, seeking to make the child a protagonist of their learning. Assessment "does not involve either the classification of the child's learning, nor value judgment, focusing on the documentation of the process and the description of learning, valuing their ways of learning and their progress" (Silva et al., 2016, p. 15).

In primary education, tensions arising from assessment systems that condition teaching work have been identified (Pereira & Fonseca, 2026). In the Portuguese context, the pressure exerted by external assessment stands out, materialized in the final exams introduced in 2012/2013, subsequently replaced by benchmark tests in 2015/2016 and, more recently, in 2024/2025, by the *Provas de Monitorização da Aprendizagem* (ModA).

A formative assessment perspective focuses on the development of the process and progress in each child's learning. Consequently, it is not compatible with normative assessment approaches, which situate this learning against previously established norms or standards. Similarly, a summative assessment that quantifies or establishes levels of learning is also not compatible with this formative approach.

2.2 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

The concept of SR finds its roots in classical sociology, particularly in the work of Émile Durkheim. In his work *Représentations individuelles et représentations collectives* (Durkheim, 1898), the author distinguishes individual thought from social thought, arguing that there are forms of consciousness that transcend the isolated subject and belong to society as a totality. For Durkheim (1898), collective representations are ways of thinking and feeling external to the individual, endowed with coercive power, which guide social practices.

As Jovchelovitch (2000) underlines, for Durkheim, the society is not reduced to an aggregate of individuals, just as SR are not reduced to an aggregate of individual representations. Along the same lines, Doise (1989) considers SR as mechanisms of mediation between the individual and society, emphasizing their historical, symbolic, and normative character. Thus, the starting point of knowledge ceases to be the individual and becomes society, as a collective subject, and, concomitantly, thought is assumed as a historical, symbolic, and normative product.

Durkheim's influence extended to various scholars, notably Serge Moscovici, who expanded this legacy by formulating the Theory of Social Representations (TSR). In his foundational work, *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*, Moscovici defines SR as forms of knowledge socially elaborated and shared, which enable the interpretation of reality and the guidance of action (Moscovici, 1961).

According to the author, representations constitute organized sets of concepts, statements, and explanations that function as common-sense theories, rendering the unfamiliar familiar and enabling action in the social world. They are not mere opinions, but symbolic systems that articulate cognition, affectivity, and practice. Moscovici identifies two fundamental processes in their formation: anchoring, which integrates the new into pre-existing categories, and objectification, which concretizes abstract ideas into socially shareable images (Moscovici, 1961).

Moscovici's perspective is expanded by Denise Jodelet (1984), who emphasizes the simultaneously psychological and social character of representations, understanding them as systems of reference that enable the interpretation of experience and the guidance of action. From the author's perspective, representations constitute forms of practical knowledge, linked to lived experience and mobilized in communication and the organization of social life. Thus, representations not only describe reality but also contribute to its construction, legitimizing practices and identities.

The understanding of SR also benefits from the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the concept of *habitus*. For Bourdieu (2002), social agents develop, through an initial process of objectification of the social followed by subjectification, durable dispositions that orient perceptions and practices. Representations, in this sense, are not neutral but express social positions and participate in the reproduction or transformation of social structures.

In the field of education, and particularly in teacher training as a social subsystem, the TSR has been widely mobilized to understand the cognitive and affective aspects that mobilize teaching practices. Students in initial training construct images, for example, about what it means to be a teacher, about authority, about the social function of school, and about assessment. Such SR structure professional identities and orient action (Jodelet, 1984).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative and exploratory methods grounded in the structural approach of TSR. It sought to understand the internal organization of a group's SR concerning a given object (Abric, 2001), in this case, assessment.

The study sample included students enrolled in the first year of the master's programs in Preschool Education and in Preschool Education and Primary Education at the University of Évora, in the academic year 2025/2026. The group comprised 30 participants, corresponding to 89% and 88% of the total population of each program, respectively. Of the total participants, 29 (97%) were female and 1 (3%) was male, with a mean age of 25 years.

For data collection, the free word association technique (FWAT) was employed, administered through an online questionnaire at the beginning of the 2025/2026 academic year, in the Inclusive Education and Pedagogical Differentiation class, common to both programs involved. This technique, widely used in studies on SR (Almeida Júnior et al., 2022; Sá, 1996), allows participants to spontaneously express the terms most readily accessible to their consciousness (Ortiz & Magalhães Júnior, 2019; Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). The spontaneous character, combined with the projective dimension of the evocations, facilitates access to the elements constituting the semantic universe of the object of study in a rapid and direct manner (Abric, 2001).

In the first stage of data collection, students were invited to record five words that came to mind upon reading the inducing term assessment. Subsequently, they were asked to hierarchize these associations according to their importance in relation to the term, assigning 1 to the most relevant and 5 to the least relevant.

The hierarchization stage allows for the reassessment of the order of the evoked associations, favoring the participants' cognitive organization (Carmo et al., 2019). Furthermore, this hierarchization is fundamental for identifying the central, intermediate, and peripheral elements of SR, as it simultaneously considers the frequency and the average order of evocation. Based on this procedure, it is possible to construct the four-quadrant framework, also known as the Vergès framework, according to the parameters of the prototypical structuralist approach (Almeida Júnior et al., 2022).

Finally, students were invited to justify the choice of each evoked word. This stage enables a deeper understanding of the meanings attributed to the evocations, as well as evidencing the cognitive structure underlying the SR.

For data analysis, the participants' free associations were recorded in Microsoft Excel. Subsequently, lemmatization of the associations was performed, a technique of lexical treatment and linguistic normalization that standardizes verbal, nominal, and gender forms, generally converting verbs to the infinitive and nouns to the masculine singular (Mazieri et al., 2023).

To describe the structure of the SR of assessment, multiple frequency analysis, prototypical analysis, and similitude analysis were employed, using IRaMuTeQ software, version 0.8. Multiple frequency analysis

enables the identification of which elements appear most frequently in the participants' evocations and contributes to establishing the minimum frequency used in subsequent analyses. Prototypical analysis, in turn, is based on the calculation of frequencies and orders of evocation of words, as well as the organization of evocations into categories, considering their compositions and co-occurrences, which leads to the construction of the four-quadrant framework (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). Similitude analysis, developed based on the results of the prototypical analysis, allows for the exploration of the level of connectivity between the elements belonging to the central and peripheral systems of the social representation and assists in verifying the centrality of the elements identified in the four-quadrant framework (Pecora & Sá, 2008).

The application of the questionnaire followed the norms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), having received a favorable approval from the Data Protection Officer of the University of Évora on September 29, 2025, and approval from the Rector of the University of Évora on September 30, 2025.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants evoked a total of 150 words in relation to the inducing term assessment. For the prototypical analysis, the minimum frequency adopted for inclusion of words was 3, corresponding to at least 2% of the sample size. Consequently, 93 words were discarded due to their relative frequency being below 2%, resulting in 101 associations, equivalent to 38% of the sample, distributed across 11 distinct words (Table 1). Within this semantic universe, by observing the most frequent associations, it is noticeable that assessment is related, to a large extent, with the idea of learning and continuous.

Table 1 – Frequency of evoked associations

Association	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
learning	8	5.3
continuous	6	4.0
reflection	4	2.7
assignment	4	2.7
test	4	2.7
presentation	4	2.7
quality	3	2.0
development	3	2.0
objective	3	2.0
progress	3	2.0
feedback	3	2.0
evolution	3	2.0
formative	3	2.0
understanding	3	2.0
knowledge	3	2.0
Total	57	38.0

Source: Prepared by the authors

Regarding the criteria adopted to define the quadrant coordinates in the prototypical analysis, the average order of evocation (AOE) was 2.86 and the average frequency (F) was 3.8. Thus, words with an AOE lower than 2.86 were classified as having a low order of evocation, while those with an F below 3.8 were considered low frequency.

Based on this analysis, the central, intermediate, and peripheral elements of the social representation were identified, organized in the four-quadrant framework (Table 2), which will be discussed below.

Table 2 – Four-quadrant framework

Central core			First periphery		
$F \geq 3,8$ and $AOE < 2,86$			$F \geq 3,8$ and $AOE \geq 2,86$		
Words	f	ome	Words	f	ome
learning	8	2,62	reflection	4	3,00
continuous	6	1,83	presentation	4	3,50
assignment	4	2,75	test	4	4,50
Contrast zone			Second periphery		
$F < 3,8$ and $AOE < 2,86$			$F < 3,8$ and $AOE \geq 2,86$		
Words	f	ome	Words	f	ome
knowledge	3	2,00	development	3	3,30
progress	3	2,33	feedback	3	3,30
evolution	3	2,67	understanding	3	3,30
formative	3	2,67	qualidade	3	3,33
			quality	3	3,33

Note. f = frequency of the evoked word; aoe = average order of evocation of the word.

Source: Prepared by the authors

In Table 2, the first quadrant (upper left) brings together the central elements, characterized by high F and low AOE. This quadrant corresponds to the central core of the social representation, including the words learning, continuous, and assignment.

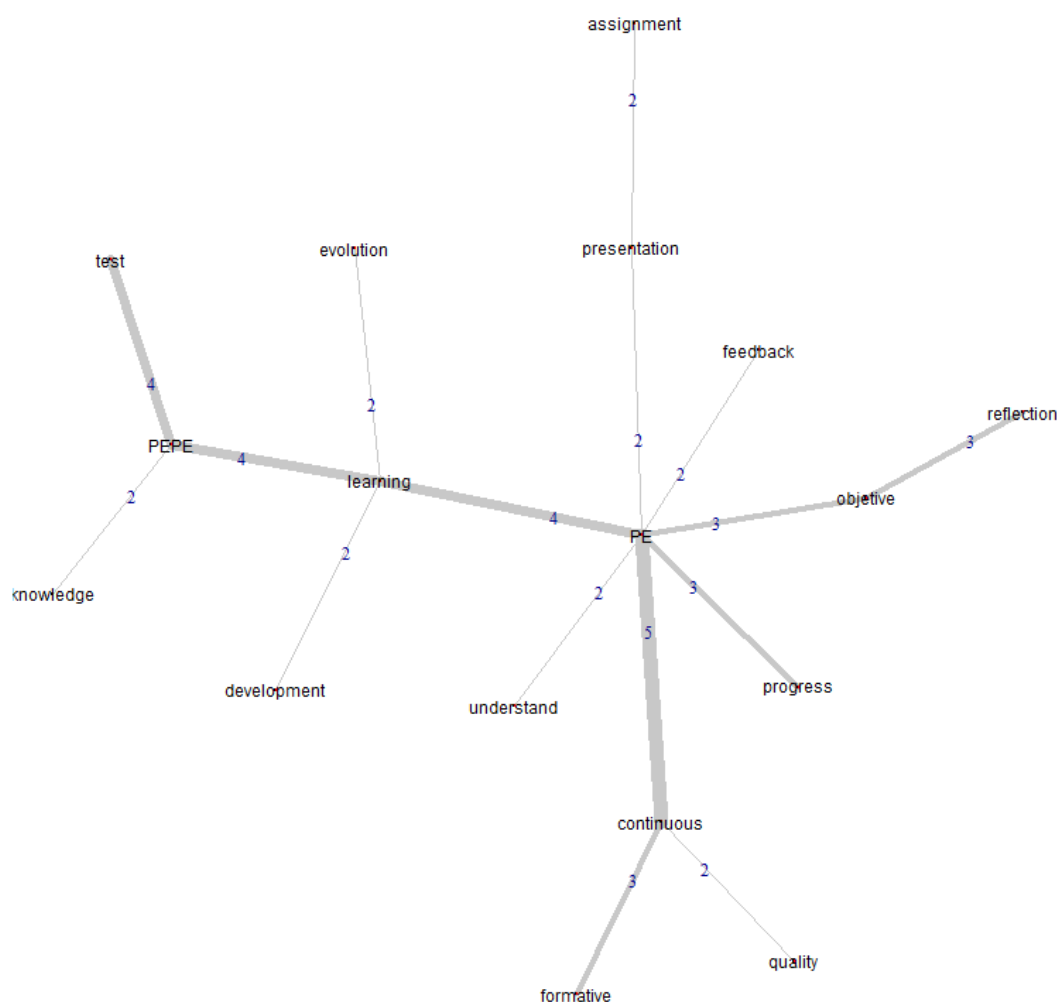
The second quadrant (upper right) groups the intermediate elements with high F and high AOE, representing the first periphery of the representation. It brings the words reflection, test, and presentation.

The third quadrant (lower left) also contains intermediate elements, this time characterized by low F and low AOE, corresponding to the contrast zone of the representation. This quadrant includes the words progress, evolution, formative, and knowledge.

The fourth quadrant (lower right) is formed by the peripheral elements, with low F and high AOE, which constitute the second periphery of the representation. Here are situated the words quality, objective, development, feedback, and understanding.

Finally, the results of the similitude analysis (Figure 1), carried out based on the two programs that compose the student sample, Preschool Education (PE) and Preschool Education and Primary Education (PEPE), evidence the functional centrality, in addition to the cognitive centrality, of the element learning, connected to both groups of students with the same intensity (4), as well as to the elements development and evolution, also with equal intensity (2).

Figure 1 – Illustrative tree of the similitude analysis



Note. PE = Preschool Education; PEPE = Preschool Education and Primary Education.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The analysis further reveals a greater richness of elements associated with assessment by students from the PE program, compared to those from the PEPE program. This difference appears to be related to a greater coherence, in preschool education, with contemporary evaluative perspectives, centered on observation, pedagogical documentation, and learning regulation, assuming an eminently formative character (Silva et al, 2026). In contrast, in the first cycle of basic education, the pressure exerted by external assessments may favor more summative and normative approaches.

Below, the evoked associations are analyzed with the aim of evidencing the structure of the SR, the different levels of centrality, and the meanings attributed to the inducing term assessment.

4.1 CENTRAL CORE

According to the results of the multiple frequency and prototypical analyses, there are indications that the central core of the SR of assessment for this group of students is formed by the elements learning, continuous, and assignment. Regarding learning, the analysis of the justifications provided by the students evidences that, in general, they perceive assessment from a formative perspective, in order to monitor the learning process. However, different emphases within this field of meaning are observed. While some students (E11, E14, E20, and E29) associate assessment with a form of learning monitoring, highlighting its reflective character, others (E4 and E17) associate it with a form of learning consolidation, centered on the verification of what was or was not learned. These perceptions can be identified in the following excerpts:

This serves to observe and confirm, based on certain criteria, whether the objectives have been met. (E4)

Assessment emerges as a reflective method on the educator's practice. Thinking about whether learning is being effective and children are progressing. (E11)

Assessment is an important tool to understand where children are in their learning. (E50)

I consider that these are the words that best evoke assessment, they are the ones I think of when I think of the word assessment, taking it as a consolidation of the learning that was acquired, in order to understand what was learned or not. (E17)

Assessment also serves to promote learning. The result is a consequence of learning and through it, it is possible to perceive what still needs to be worked on. (E20)

It is through assessment that both teachers and students will know how student learning is progressing and thus also know how their evolution regarding this is occurring. (E29)

Regarding the word continuous, it is observed that students associate assessment with the idea of a process that develops over time and that takes into account the child's trajectory, as stated in the following excerpts:

Assessment should be a continuous process. (E13)

Assessment should be a formative and continuous process so that it is better for the child. (E19)

Assessment should be carried out over time, taking into account the child's trajectory. (E24)

Regarding the element assignment, an association is observed with the assessment instruments used, both from the teacher's and the student's perspective. This conception is evident in the following excerpts:

These are forms of assessment that they use with me as a university student. (E12)

Tests and assignments are assessment instruments. (E20)

When we think of assessment, the idea of written tests, pressure, anxiety, and everything that surrounds traditional education normally occurs to us. It is through these methods such as group work, communication to the class, class projects, school projects, actually involving children with each other and with the content, so that they become active and participative citizens. (E22)

According to Abric (2001), the central core constitutes the essential element of any representation, serving as the axis around which the entire representation is organized and from which its meaning is determined. The author describes two fundamental functions of the central core: a generating function, through which it confers meaning and value upon the other elements of the SR, allowing for the creation or transformation of the meanings of the other components; and an organizing function, as it is up to the central core to define the nature of the connections between elements, functioning as a factor of unification and stability of the representation. Being the most stable component of the SR, it is also the most resistant to change.

In this regard, it can be inferred that the SR of students from the master's programs in Preschool Education and in Primary Education at the University of Évora associate assessment with a predominantly formative perspective, understanding it as a process closely linked to the monitoring and consolidation of learning. This may be explained, at least in part, by the influence of the curricular and normative frameworks that guide assessment in preschool education and in the first cycle of basic education, which are extensively analyzed and discussed in various curricular units of the general educational area and in specific didactics, and which value assessment as a formative and regulatory process of learning, even if they may not be entirely coincident with the practices effectively developed in the academic context.

These results differ, however, from those presented by Vieira and Resende (2013) and Vieira et al. (2014), in similar studies conducted in Brazil with students from Pedagogy programs who will be

future teachers. In those studies, although the participants recognize the importance of assessment as a constitutive element of the learning process, their SR are anchored in a traditional and classificatory perspective, marked by the predominance of the written test as the main assessment instrument and by the association with ideas of ritual, discomfort, and failure.

4.2 FIRST PERIPHERY

The results presented in the four-quadrant framework evidence that the first periphery was composed of the elements reflection, presentation, and test. In the students' justifications, there is no mention of the reason for choosing the word presentation.

Regarding reflection, only two justifications mention this association, in which assessment is perceived as a strategy for reflection and improvement of teaching practices, as is clear in the following excerpts:

Assessment should be a form of reflection and improvement of the practices used. (E4)
Assessment emerges as a reflective method on the educator's practice. (E11)

Concerning the element test, it is observed that these associations are related to the assessment instruments used. It is worth noting that some excerpts reveal a negative connotation associated with this word, indicating that tests are perceived as not being the best way to assess, associated with pressure and anxiety, characteristic of a more traditional assessment. This idea is evident in the following excerpts:

These are forms of assessment that they use with me as a university student. I believe there are ways to assess in a more interactive way and not so "traditional". (E12)
For better or worse, it is often done through tests. (E17)
Tests and assignments are assessment instruments. (E20)
When we think of assessment, the idea of written tests, pressure, anxiety, and everything that surrounds traditional education normally occurs to us. It is through these methods such as group work, communication to the class, class projects, school projects, actually involving children with each other and with the content, so that they become active and participative citizens. (E22)
I think we focus too much on the word assessment on assessment tests, when in my view they are not the most suitable method to promote learning in students. (E30)

The peripheral system enables the SR to anchor in the subjects' reality, allowing for adaptations, oppositions, and contradictions, reflecting the heterogeneity of the group's perceptions (Wolter, 2018). Furthermore, it functions as a scheme of action, enabling the concretization of the representation in daily practice (Abric, 2001).

In the case of the first periphery, although its elements represent secondary evocations, they complement the central core, bringing it closer to the reality of the studied group and integrating lived experiences (Wolter, 2018). This implies that reflection, test, and presentation are the elements that most contribute to the understanding of students' SR of assessment, most likely reflecting both the most common teaching practices and the learning experiences lived by the students.

Regarding reflection, this association evidences a formative and reflective dimension of assessment, allowing the teacher to analyze their own practice. It is worth noting, however, that the centrality of this function lies with the teacher, with no reflective role being observed on the part of the students.

Analyzing the similitude tree, it is observed that this association is more evident among students from the master's program in Preschool Education than among students from the Preschool Education and Primary Education program. This result may be related to the fact that, in the preschool context, it is particularly relevant to encourage agential behaviors, that is, actions in which the child assumes an active role in their own learning, demonstrating initiative, autonomy, and the capacity to make decisions, supported by formative assessment practices. It is possible that the profile of students in this program makes them more sensitive to these issues (Braund et al., 2021).

Concerning the test, the association reflect the more instrumental character of assessment, sometimes associated with a negative interpretation and a traditional perspective. Such associations appear to be related to the experience of these students as students in Basic and Secondary Education, as mentioned by E12. Regarding presentation, there is no evidence to allow a clear interpretation for this association, although it may be related to the fact that oral presentations of assignments are a common assessment strategy in these programs.

4.3 CONTRAST ZONE

Regarding the elements of the contrast zone, they encompass the elements progress, evolution, formative, and knowledge. The students did not justify the evocation of the words progress and knowledge. In this sense, based solely on the literal meaning of these words, it is not possible to elaborate a reliable interpretation of the associations attributed to them.

In relation to the word evolution, it is observed that this refers to the idea of progress in learning, associated with the promotion of effective learning. This perception is evident in the following excerpts:

Thinking about whether learning is being effective and children are evolving. (E11)
It is through assessment that both teachers and students will know how student learning is progressing and thus also know how their evolution regarding this is occurring. (E29)

Finally, regarding the word formative, a contemporary perspective of assessment is verified, associating it with a process aimed at the continuous improvement of learning, as is evident in the following excerpts:

Assessment should be a formative and continuous process so that it is better for the child. (E19)

Formative: it should be such that the child can understand what they already know and what they should improve and how. (E24)

The contrast zone brings together elements that evidence differences in the way the SR are conceived by distinct subgroups, suggesting potential processes of representational change or transition (Sá et al., 2009). These elements may integrate the central core of the representation for some participants and are considered relevant, even if they do not present the same frequency as the words of the central core (Hilger et al., 2017).

Because they are not widely shared, the elements of the contrast zone assume a distinctive character within the representational structure. This configuration indicates two possibilities: they may act as extensions of the first periphery or reveal the presence of a minority subgroup that consistently values certain elements (Abric, 2005; Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). In this case, the SR of this subgroup results from the combination of the elements of the contrast zone with those of the central core, configuring a variation or transition of the predominant social representation (Abric, 2005).

Based on the constitution of the contrast zone observed in the present study, associated with the justifications provided by the students, it is suggested that this zone fits as an extension of the first periphery, reinforcing the central core, since it does not oppose the element learning present there.

4.4 SECOND PERIPHERY

Finally, in the second periphery, the following elements were identified: quality, objective, development, feedback, and understanding. Regarding the words quality and development, no justifications were found that mention the reason for choosing these associations.

The word objective associates assessment with the strategy of verifying whether the desired results were achieved, as is evident in the following excerpts:

This [assessment] serves to observe and confirm, based on certain criteria, whether the objectives have been met. (E4)

I consider that there are several more modern assessment methods that generate meaningful learning in children, which is the objective. (E22)

We must observe and examine our students, ensuring that they can achieve the proposed objectives. (E27)

Regarding feedback, it is observed that it is associated with a strategy that allows teachers and children/students to identify progress and aspects to be improved, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

The teacher/educator should provide quality feedback to the child so that they can know and better understand what they already know and what they should still improve. (E24)
The first word, feedback, I consider it to be one of the main objectives of assessment. With it, the teacher will have a notion of what needs to be better worked on, as well as which students need more support and in which areas. (E29)

Concerning the word understanding, it is observed that it is associated with a process that allows the teacher to perceive students' needs and assess whether learning has occurred, with the aim of improving pedagogical practice. This perception is evident in the following excerpts:

I consider that these are the words that best evoke assessment, they are the ones I think of when I think of the word assessment, taking it as a consolidation of the learning that was acquired, in order to understand what was learned or not. (E17)
It is important to analyze and understand the students' needs, in order to be able to diagnose where to focus our action. (E19)

The elements that compose the second periphery present low frequency and low salience within the representational field (Abric, 2005), reflecting more particular and individual aspects of the participants (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). Thus, although they do not influence the global structure of the group's SR, these elements delineate the boundary of the social representation (Guerra-Reyes et al., 2023).

Therefore, although they compose the structure of the SR of assessment of the participant group, the words quality, objective, development, feedback, and understanding represent more individualized elements, reflecting specific perceptions of the students that are not widely shared within the group. Even so, these associations allow the identification of some interesting aspects about assessment, such as the promotion of learning, the monitoring of student progress, and the improvement of pedagogical practice, elements that reinforce the formative character attributed to assessment by the respondents.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to analyze the structure of the SR of assessment among first-year students of the master's programs in Preschool Education and in Preschool Education and Primary Education, this study applied the FWAT to 30 students at the University of Évora. The results revealed a representational structure centered, primarily, on the element learning, reflecting a predominantly formative perspective of assessment.

This centrality suggests that these pre-service early childhood educators perceive assessment essentially as a continuous and articulated process of monitoring, regulating, and consolidating learning. This fact demonstrates that, for these students, assessment is, above all, a process oriented towards supporting children's development and informing pedagogical decisions.

In the first periphery, the results identified the elements reflection, presentation, and test. The word reflection, more evident in the associations of students from the master's program in Preschool Education, reinforces the formative dimension of assessment, a fundamental dimension for the child to assume an active role in their own learning, demonstrating initiative, autonomy, and the capacity to make decisions, supported by reflective practices. The element test, as well as assignment, identified in the central core, refers to the more instrumental character of assessment and may reflect students' experiences in previous educational cycles. Regarding the term presentation, sufficient evidence does not emerge to allow a clear interpretation, possibly being an occasional reference to evaluative practices previously experienced.

In the second periphery, the elements quality, objective, development, feedback, and understanding reflect more individualized perceptions, not widely shared by the group. Even so, they contribute to reinforcing the conception of assessment as a process oriented towards the promotion and monitoring of learning and the continuous improvement of pedagogical practice.

Finally, in the contrast zone, the words progress, evolution, formative, and knowledge emerged. Based on the justifications presented by the students, it is suggested that this zone functions as an extension of the first periphery, reinforcing the central core, since the elements that constitute it do not oppose the structuring concept of learning; on the contrary, they complement it, evidencing the procedural and formative nature of the evaluative act.

In summary, it is observed that the students' SR of assessment are organized around a notably formative perception, centered on learning, on monitoring children's development, and on the regulatory role of assessment on learning and pedagogical practice. These representations reveal a vision coherent with the current principles of assessment for learning.

It should be emphasized that this study involves only students from two programs at a Portuguese university, so the results must be interpreted within this context and cannot be generalized to other institutions or realities. Future studies may investigate SR in different programs or institutions, in order to identify nuances and specificities that contribute to the development of more adapted and contextualized evaluative practices.

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