

Burnout and Social Representations among Educators and Specialized Educators



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Abstract

This modest contribution examines the phenomenon of burnout through the production of evocations, focusing on the social representations of educators and specialized educators working in medical-pedagogical centers for mentally maladjusted children in Constantine (Ali Mendjeli and Daksi 1) and Ras El Oued (Bordj Bou Arreridj). The objectives of this study are twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to verify the possible impact of burnout on the production of representational items. On the other hand, it aims to refine the analysis of the components of the semantic field structuring the representational system of the two populations concerned by the investigation. This operational approach may ultimately make it possible to identify the causal agent of this suffering or the specific professional context in which it emerges.

Keywords

Burnout ;
Educators ;
Professional Exhaustion ;
Social Representations ;
Specialized Educators.

الكلمات المفتاحية

احتراق مهني؛
مربون؛
إرهاق مهني؛
تمثيلات اجتماعية؛
مربون متخصصون.

الاحتراق المهني والتمثيلات الاجتماعية لدى المربين والمربين المتخصصين

ملخص

تركز هذه الدراسة على بحث تأثير الإرهاق في إنتاج التمثيلات الاجتماعية، وذلك من خلال تحليل تلك التمثيلات لدى المربين والمربين المتخصصين العاملين في المراكز الطبية التربوية للأطفال ذوي الإعاقة الذهنية، في بلدية قسنطينة (دقسي 1)، (وعلي منجلي) الخروب، ورأس الواد (ببرج بوعريريج). تهدف الدراسة إلى جانبين رئيسيين؛ الأول يتمثل في استقصاء التأثير المحتمل للإرهاق على النظام التمثيلي، والثاني يسعى إلى تعزيز فهم مكونات الحقل الدلالي لهذا النظام لدى الفئتين المستهدفتين. يوفر هذا التحليل العملي فرصة لتشخيص العوامل التي تسبب الإرهاق أو فهم محددات السياق المهني الذي يؤدي إلى هذه الحالة.

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I- Introduction :

At the present time, work-related malaise among social service professionals (and more specifically among psychologists, specialized teaching staff, specialized educators, and educators) has emerged as a major and central issue. How can we analyze the emergence and establishment of work-related wear and tear among educators and specialized educators in professional settings, namely within CMPEIMs (medical-pedagogical centers for children with intellectual disabilities)?

Do the expressed forms of malaise not reveal a state of professional wear in which the effects of direct trauma are becoming increasingly visible on a daily basis, in the behaviors and practices of these social workers, who, according to their own accounts, remain the last line of defense against the pathological manifestations of individuals suffering from behavioral disorders and “psycho-affective maladjustments” integrated into these treatment or care institutions?

The observation of such a daily reality experienced by educators and specialized educators once again reflects a persistent “malaise” that risks leading to a paralysis of psycho-educational intervention practices. This situation is recurrent within the educational and social field and has repeatedly arisen and imposed itself, without any follow-up during institutional meetings or even during seminars and conferences that debate this issue.

The situation is becoming increasingly complex. The work climate is now surrounded by doubt, vague impressions, and a profound sense of disorientation, with social actors rendered powerless in the face of confrontations that leave educators and specialized educators confused or even completely helpless.

The social worker, often confronted with complex, paradoxical, tense, and conflictual situations, must operate within closed institutional environments. These specific settings foster the emergence of a malaise linked to a feeling of displacement, mismatch, or maladjustment, which takes hold when the worker becomes aware of the inadequacy of their professional tools. Whether grounded in psychological or social approaches, these tools frequently prove insufficient, outdated, or ineffective when faced with the depth of distress experienced by the individuals to whom support is offered.

This distress, inherent in precarious forms of existence, exceeds the capacity to be fully experienced by the subjects themselves, who are compelled to retreat into a survival logic in response to contemporary social fractures.

This reality is further intensified by the particular framework of medical-pedagogical centers for children with mental disorders, closed institutions often perceived as environments conducive to the development of deviant behaviors and the spread of pathologies.

According to Jodelet (1989), social representations are cognitive constructions developed from the social realities within which the concerned actors evolve; in this case, specialized educators and educators. These representations, which serve as a reference framework for their professional behaviors, directly influence the way social workers perceive and manage the care of children with mental disabilities. It therefore appears that the professional exhaustion experienced by these workers may be partially attributed to the social representations they develop in this regard. This idea is supported by Abric (1994), who defines social representations as complex systems that are socially invested and historically determined.

The objective of this study is precisely to identify and analyze these social representations among social workers involved in the care of children presenting mental disorders. This involves describing the constituent elements of these representations, conducting an in-depth examination of the structure of the components underlying them, and highlighting structural differences according to the level of training of the specialized educators and educators concerned.

The dependent variable of this study consists of social representations related to professional burnout. According to Abric (1996), these representations are defined as both the product and the process of a mental activity through which an individual or a social group reconstructs reality and assigns it a specific meaning. They render reality intelligible for the subject, mobilize the imagination, and are embedded in a relational dynamic with others. These viewpoints, whether positive or negative, directly influence the actions and decisions of the social worker.

Two aspects are taken into account in the analysis of social representations:

- **Their content or composition:** the constituent elements of the representational system.

- **Their structure or organization:** the hierarchy of representational elements, determining the importance attributed to certain elements over others.

The achievement of these objectives requires the implementation of an appropriate methodology, described in the following lines, drawing on several images derived from prolonged immersion in this particular professional context of burnout, as experienced by educators and specialized educators in professional settings, namely medical-pedagogical centers for children with intellectual disabilities. We chose to discuss this research object in the field because we ourselves were, for many years, eroded by this quite particular professional context, potentially marked by psychological suffering and by an overload of mental and physical activities.

Indeed, we will present several evocations collected, as far as possible, within an informal framework, in light of institutional constraints related to the end of the school year, and with spontaneity on the part of educators and specialized educators (we made use of the time devoted to end-of-year university thesis defenses to elicit evocations associated with the inducing word “professional burnout”). These evocations reflect concrete images and a theorization of naïve knowledge derived from social representations.

The theme of professional burnout requires sustained attention, which should be invested in order to understand its etiology, its causal agents, as well as its consequences on the health of social workers and on their professional trajectories.

I.1. Theoretical and Epistemological Approach

I.1.1. Social Representations

According to Rouquette (1997), social representations constitute a shared, localized, and temporary way of perceiving the world within a given culture. They serve as a cognitive appropriation of an aspect of reality and guide the actions associated with it. Three levels can be identified in this definition. Essentially, representation is a form of theorization of the world that enables action and structures our behaviors. It is based on spontaneous or intuitive explanations that form a foundation for adopting specific modes of conduct.

With regard to their definition, certain cognitivists, such as Piaget (1926), view social representations as processes of information processing. Piaget considers representation to be a mental activity that makes an absent object or event present to the mind through an image or another medium (Noumbissie, 2019). These representations may be expressed in the form of images, sensations, perceptions, or even categorizations and “acting,” as well as systems that allow for the interpretation of the social environment (Mapto Kengne, 2011, cited by H. Ali Yanda, 2023).

Other researchers regard social representations as cognitive strategies implemented to respond to a given problem, perceiving them as structured and specific knowledge that integrates information related to a particular fact. They form a framework that influences our thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs, while constituting a reference system that enables meaning to be attributed to unforeseen events (Jodelet, 1989).

Social representations are situated at the intersection of interactions between the individual and their environment, forming a universe of thought shaped by these exchanges. They play a central role in group dynamics, where opinions converge collectively. From this perspective, Herzlich (1971) conceives representation as a process of constructing reality in which members of a group exchange beliefs, ideas, and values that directly impact their behaviors. Moreover, Gilly (1980) highlights their potential in the educational field, particularly within the school environment. The study of social representations allows for a better understanding of the issues related to learning and teaching practices.

Moscovici (1984), cited by Noumbissie (2019), further enriches this analysis by defining social representations as systems composed of values, ideas, and practices that serve a dual function. On the one hand, they provide an order within which individuals can orient themselves in order to master their tangible environment; on the other hand, they facilitate communication within a community by offering a common language to distinguish and qualify the dimensions of the world, as well as individual and collective trajectories. Within the educational context, their analysis is of particular importance, as it offers insights into methods and practices that promote academic success. It also helps teachers develop critical reflection on their own pedagogical approaches and facilitates adaptation to learners’ needs.

Finally, according to Rateau and Lo Monaco (2013), four main characteristics define social representations. First, they are characterized by an internal organization. Second, they are shared by the members of the same group. Third, they are based on a collective process of construction, produced through a global dynamic of communication. Finally, their purpose is practical. As specified by Roussiau and Bonardi (2001a, cited by Moliner, 2002), a social representation corresponds to a collective organization of opinions related to a given object. It arises from a set of social

communications and enables individuals to master their environment by appropriating it through symbolic elements specific to the group to which they belong.

I.1.2. Professional Burnout

The syndrome of professional burnout, commonly referred to by its English term burnout, is not officially recognized as a pathology in the major medical classifications (ICD-10 and DSM-5). Nevertheless, it is associated with non-specific disorders such as work-related suffering or the repercussions of stress linked to professional activity. After organic and functional disorders, psychological distress correlated with or exacerbated by work constitutes one of the major problems occurring in this context.

Defined as “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged engagement in emotionally demanding professional situations,” burnout has been extensively studied through the work of Christina Maslach. She conceptualized it as a process of deterioration of the subjective relationship to work, which manifests primarily through three dimensions: emotional exhaustion; a cynical or detached attitude toward work (depersonalization and indifference); and a reduction in the sense of personal accomplishment or work-related efficacy.

The progression of this syndrome is often subtle and gradual, making its detection difficult due to its insidious nature. Manifestations vary but frequently include a range of symptoms distributed across several categories:

Emotional manifestations: anxiety, generalized muscular tension, sad or apathetic mood, increased irritability, emotional hypersensitivity, or, at times, a complete absence of affective reactions.

Cognitive functions: memory problems, difficulties in maintaining attention or concentration, and impairment of executive functions.

Behaviors and social interactions: tendency toward withdrawal, social isolation, episodic aggressiveness, reduced empathy, resentment, hostility toward colleagues, or addictive behaviors.

Motivation and attitude toward work: progressive disengagement, loss of motivation, questioning of professional values, doubts about one's competencies, and feelings of devaluation.

Various physical manifestations: excessive fatigue, sleep disturbances, musculoskeletal pain (lower back pain, neck pain), cramps, headaches, dizziness, loss of appetite, or digestive disorders.

In order to better understand this syndrome and delineate its specific features, a rigorous diagnostic assessment remains essential. This approach also makes it possible to detect potential underlying pathologies, such as adjustment disorders, anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

II- Methodological Approach

To conduct this study, we selected the medical-pedagogical centers of Constantine Daksi 01 and Daksi 02, as well as the center of Ras El Oued, Bordj Bou Arréridj.

In the absence of comprehensive statistical data or a sampling frame concerning social workers operating in these “specialized institutions,” an accidental sampling method was adopted. As emphasized by N'Da (2002), this technique is particularly relevant when the groups under study are not predefined for research purposes due to a lack of available data, but are accepted based on their accessibility. Its advantage lies in the possibility of forming equivalent and comparable groups.

The final sample consists of 61 participants, aged between 24 and 51 years, who were surveyed using a questionnaire. This tool, recognized for its metrological robustness, is based on the structured questionnaire developed by Abric (1994), designed to explore social representations.

The instrument is divided into two complementary parts:

- **The evocation questionnaire:** Inspired by Abric's work, it employs a free association method to collect participants' spontaneous discourse. This technique relies on inductive words in order to trigger reflection.
- **The centrality test:** This recognition exercise aims to identify representations of the central core. Participants are required to specify whether the proposed items “certainly,” “perhaps,” or “not at all” characterize the object submitted to their judgment.

The data collected were analyzed using the EVOC 2005 software, specifically designed for the study of social representations. This method is based on three key parameters: minimum frequency, mean rank, intermediate frequency of verbal productions.

These measures make it possible to identify both the components and the hierarchy of elements of social representations related to care practices, according to the participants' level of education. The analysis reveals instructive results in relation to the two dimensions identified by Abric's (1994) theory of social representations. First, it sheds light on the content of social representations concerning professional burnout among specialized educators, distinguishing between those with a higher educational level (baccalaureate and above) and those with a secondary level. Second, it explores the structure of these representations within these same groups.

II.1. Research Population and Sample

Through this investigation, whose sample consists of 30 specialized educators and 31 educators, these social workers experience their institutional reality negatively, associated with a sense of malaise generated by the work of caring for individuals with intellectual disabilities within closed specialized institutions, which in turn fosters the emergence of institutional difficulties. Each sample characterizes the parent population under study, as strongly recommended by J.-C. Abric (2003).

Finally, the administrations were conducted individually, depending on the availability of the respondents, and generally within their workplaces, namely within the CMPEIMs. In this section, we present the method and techniques used to analyze the structure of social representations related to professional burnout.

The sample selected for this research was determined according to the objective of the study. It includes 61 educators and specialized educators working in CMPEIMs (Medical-Psycho-Educational Centers for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities), institutions dedicated to supporting persons suffering from mental disorders.

II.2. Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1: Characteristics and Profile of the Educators in Our Sample (Educators)

Characteristics	Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Men	25	80.64%
	Women	06	19.35%
Age	Under 30 years	10	32.25%
	From 31 to 40 years	09	29.03%
	From 41 to 50 years	10	32.25%
	Over 51 years	02	6.45%
	No response	00	00
Length of service	Less than 10 years	10	32.25%
	Between 11 and 20 years	12	38.70%
	Between 21 and 30 years	09	20.02%

	Over 31 years	00	00%
Marital status	Single	01	3.22%
	Married	30	96.77%
	Widowed / Divorced	00	00%
Academic level	Baccalaureate	10	32.25%
	Baccalaureate + 1	05	16.12%
	Baccalaureate + 2	00	00%
	Bachelor's degree	10	32.25%
	Master's degree	06	19.35%
	No response	00	00
Total		31	99.97%

Figure 1: Age Distribution of Educators

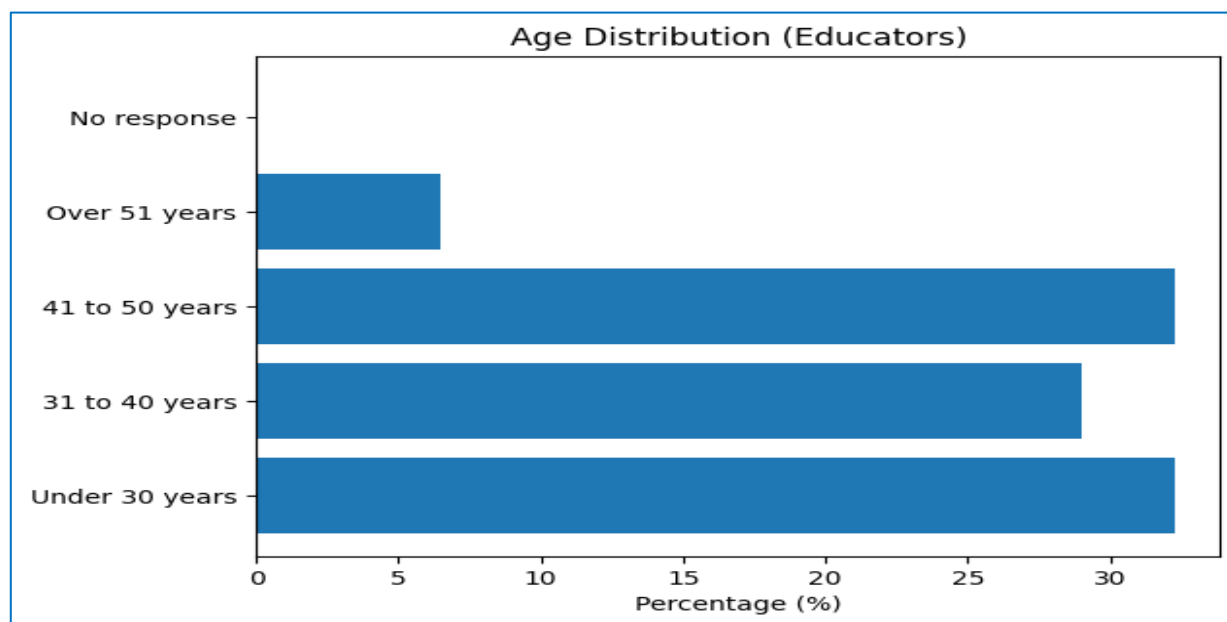
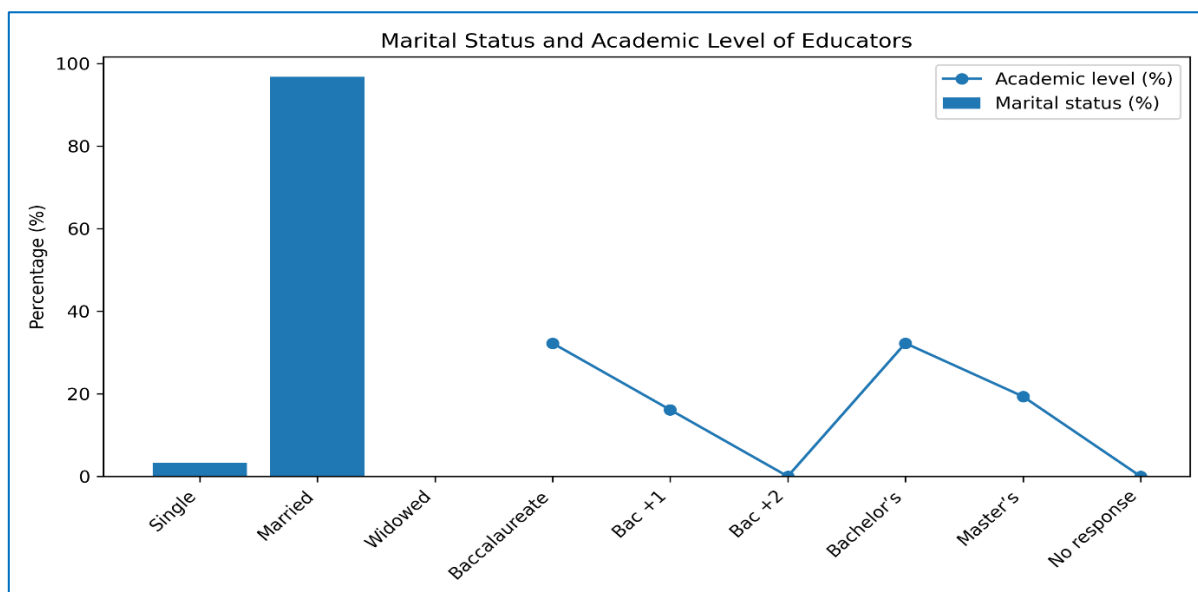


Figure 2: Distribution of Educators by Marital Status and Educational Level**Table 2: Characteristics of Our Sample: Specialized Educators**

Characteristics	Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Men	22	73.33%
	Women	08	26.66%
Age	Under 30 years	16	53.33%
	From 31 to 40 years	08	26.66%
	From 41 to 50 years	04	13.33%
	Over 51 years	02	06.66%
	No response	00	00
Length of service	Less than 10 years	12	40.00%
	Between 11 and 20 years	08	26.66%
	Between 21 and 30 years	06	20%
	Over 31 years	04	13.33%
Marital status	Single	01	3.33%
	Married	29	96.66%

	Widowed / Divorced	00	00
Academic level	Baccalaureate	12	40.00%
	Baccalaureate + 1	04	13.33%
	Baccalaureate + 2	00	00
	Bachelor's degree	10	33.33%
	Master's degree	04	13.33%
	No response	00	00
Total		30	100%

II.3. Materials and Methods

The primary objective of this research was to explore the nature of the structure of social representations of professional burnout among specialized educators working in CMPEIMs (Medical-Pedagogical Centers for Children with Intellectual Disabilities) located in the cities of Constantine and Ras El Oued (Bordj Bou Arréridj).

To collect the required data, a questionnaire was implemented. This tool, commonly used in the analysis of social representations (Abric, 2003), notably included a free association exercise. The objective of this exercise was to explore both the content and the structure of social representations related to the phenomenon of professional burnout. Participants were invited to spontaneously propose five words or expressions that came to mind regarding this topic. The free association method is distinguished by its effectiveness in bringing to light implicit or underlying elements often concealed in traditional forms of discourse (Abric, 2003, p. 63).

To distinguish central elements from more secondary notions, two main criteria were jointly applied:

- **Frequency of occurrence:** This criterion reflects the collective dimension of perception, measured through its salience, that is, the number of times a term was mentioned in relation to the total number of participants.
- **Mean rank of importance:** This indicator, derived from the prioritization performed by each participant, makes it possible to establish a ranking of terms according to the priorities expressed.

This methodological cross-analysis offers an in-depth and precise examination of both the structure and the internal dynamics of the social representations under study.

III- Results and Discussion

The results obtained lead us to formulate several conclusions. From an epistemological perspective, the notion of social representation remains central to our collective life. We now acknowledge that the components of the world in which we evolve are in constant transformation, requiring continuous adaptation as well as an increased capacity to understand and resolve the problems they generate. It is within this context that the construction of representations takes place. Faced with this abundant universe of objects, people, events, and ideas, we do not act solely according to automatisms, nor do we live in social isolation. This world is shared with others, and it is through this interaction (whether in the form of cooperation or opposition) that we attempt to understand it, organize it, or confront it, as emphasized by Denise Jodelet (2003, pp. 45–78).

Within the framework of our investigation, the social representation of professional burnout appears as an object whose social construction proves to be particularly heterogeneous. This diversity reflects the multiplicity of elements that structure its organization or cognitive architecture, shaped and enriched through social communication. According to Jodelet, the articulation of these different components can be summarized by the following questions: who knows, and where does this knowledge come from? What is known, and how is it learned? On what foundations does this

knowledge rest, and what are its effects? (1989, p. 61). These questions take on their full meaning when analyzing the evocations generated by the inductive word “professional burnout,” which elicited reactions from various social workers who expressed their positions with reference to a broad and divergent corpus integrating nuanced images of professional burnout. Ultimately, we obtained a production of common-sense knowledge reflecting the images held by educators and specialized educators within a social context marked by socio-cultural belonging and social values, generating shared references.

Regarding attitudes and behaviors, Jodelet (p. 46) proposes a dual approach to analyzing social representations:

- First, as structuring cores, that is, knowledge structures that organize the meanings associated with a particular object.
- Second, in the form of structured fields in which contents are coordinated by an organizing principle, such as attitudes, norms, or cultural schemas.

Within this framework, the analysis focuses on the positions adopted by individuals or groups.

In the context of the evocations collected from educators, the central core of social representations concerning professional burnout appears to be organized primarily around six key elements: exposure to suffering, tension, challenge, institutional duty, traumatic climate, emotional fatigue, and psychological fragility.

III.1. Professional Burnout, Self-Fragility, and Social Vulnerability

Professional burnout, like personal fragility and social vulnerability, is a frequently emphasized and analyzed issue, as it is closely linked to working conditions. It is indeed impossible to dissociate this state from the institutional contexts that contribute to its emergence. Failing to consider this would lead to a simplified and inadequate view of reality. Specialized educators often find themselves on the verge of saturation. They experience significant difficulty in continuing their professional activity, confronted with a condition that Bernard De Backer (1999) describes as a “syndrome of professional fatigue.” This condition manifests itself through profound emotional exhaustion, a loss of motivation toward beneficiaries, and a feeling of not achieving fulfillment or successfully carrying out one’s professional mission. This growing disengagement is often accompanied by a sense of incompleteness, a void left by work that no longer reflects the original meaning of their commitment. When questioned about the causes of this institutional distress, social workers primarily point to constraints and dysfunctions within institutions such as CMPEIMs (Medical-Psychological Centers for Children with Intellectual Disabilities).

III.2. Learning Processes and Behavioral Change

No one can ignore the psycho-educational intervention of the educator in modifying behaviors and developing learning in maladjusted children. Indeed, changes in the child’s daily activities can only take place through an educational relationship between the educator or specialized educator, whose objectives consist in achieving adaptation, integration, and ultimately autonomy. This psycho-educational relationship finds its continuation and true meaning in accompaniment, through which the child in a situation of maladjustment discovers activities of awakening, stimulation, or even expressive or extracurricular activities.

The missions entrusted to educators are particularly delicate, involving a workload of five hours per day in almost individualized work, not to mention the size of the groups and the degree of maladjustment of the children. The aim is to modify behaviors or facilitate the acquisition of skills or basic notions related to autonomy, communication, or other forms of expression (relational aspects, offering children opportunities to speak, listen, and support language through images, pictograms; spatial notions, symbolism, organization, body schema, movements; games initiated by children or proposed by educators).

III.3. Vigilance and Overinvestment

According to E. Levinas, if the Other remains unknowable, each individual also remains a mystery to himself. In the context of the work of the specialized educator, the educational or supportive relationship established with the individuals being assisted is based on proximity that deeply engages personal involvement. This proximity constitutes both an indispensable strength for socio-educational work and a potential source of fragility. It is impossible to remain detached or to withdraw from the personal investment required by such an approach. This dynamic may also be examined through the prism of the transfer relationship, in resonance with the reflections of certain thinkers such as Joseph Rouzel, who adopt a psychoanalytic perspective.

III.4. Institutional Wear and Suffering

Life within closed institutions dedicated to the care of maladjusted children has become increasingly difficult to endure due to the emergence of multiple paradoxes and contradictions generated by dissonances related to institutional experience or the organization of psycho-educational work. For the majority of educators and specialized educators, structural and contextual changes have intensified social workers' distress. Statutory dissatisfaction has become increasingly apparent, threatening the interruption or paralysis of educational continuity within these institutions. Harsh working conditions, combined with the excessive mobilization of professionals, place them on the brink of constant stress, if not institutional asphyxiation. Such a situation has led to the "disenchantment" of educators and specialized educators, eroding their desire to accompany, help, support, and educate.

III.5. Support and Empowerment

These two paradigms constitute the foundations of care for individuals with intellectual disabilities, wherein social workers (educators and specialized educators) engage in an educational relationship aimed at contributing to the process of socialization and empowerment of children in situations of maladjustment.

Autonomy is expressed across three major dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. Physical autonomy includes actions such as walking, moving, personal hygiene, dressing, eating, elimination, resting, or performing domestic tasks. Psychological autonomy is based on the ability to assert oneself by constructing one's own identity, expressing preferences, mastering everyday actions, making independent decisions, and knowing how to distance oneself from events. Finally, social autonomy manifests through the ability to maintain relationships, communicate with others, and possess the skills necessary to manage interactions and actions related to social life.

III.6. Affected Identity Images

The identity image of educators and specialized educators is in crisis, becoming a problematic factor that generates exhaustion and professional wear when it is affected. This situation highlights a contradiction between the personal project of the social worker and the real conditions under which the profession is practiced, as well as the institutional professional project associated with it, often in opposition. These professionals, weakened by recent statutory changes that have disrupted or ignored their aspirations, sometimes find themselves out of alignment despite their dedication and their sense of acting in the service of a population in difficulty. This distress, exacerbated by professional burnout syndrome, contributes to the emergence of social issues such as difficulties in recognition by peers. For these educators, their activity goes beyond the simple notion of work; it represents an essential means of fully existing and constructing their own identity. According to Kutty (1998), work promotes the reinvestment of elements stemming from prior socialization within new communities oriented toward shared projects. It constitutes a fundamental lever in the identity construction process, as one works with the aim of producing a useful, well-executed, and socially recognized output. When these conditions are met, the relationship to work can become a source of identity fulfillment, as explained by Rhéaume (2006).

IV- Conclusion

What we have presented in this investigation highlights the professional wear experienced by social workers confronted with institutional distress and relational difficulties, which have generated a state of suffering and professional hardship for some practitioners.

These difficulties are often expressed through behaviors marked by tension and conveying a certain animosity, whose origins are difficult to explain or decipher given the complexity of professional situations, primarily linked on the one hand to service users receiving care, and on the other hand to interpersonal conflicts among members of the multidisciplinary team. It thus becomes apparent that the daily functioning of these institutions has turned into a space of conflictuality, hindering the proper functioning of these medical-pedagogical centers.

Within this context of doubt and uncertainty, it appears almost impossible for educators and specialized educators to find resources for professional fulfillment, or the energy or potential for resilient coping in the face of tensions and overinvestment required by psycho-educational intervention.

It is within this climate of tension that we sought to explore the representational system of educators and specialized educators through the evocations collected, which enabled us to identify their central elements and peripheral components.

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