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Who Is the Intelligent Student? A Look into Teachers' Social Representations

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***Abstract*—**This study examined the social representations of the intelligent student among Algerian secondary school teachers using Abric's structural approach to Social Representation Theory. Twenty-two secondary school teachers participated in a free association task, and the data were analyzed using prototypical analysis to identify the central and peripheral elements of their shared representation.

The findings revealed that teachers primarily associated intelligence with cognitive characteristics, particularly rapid reasoning, attention and concentration, problem-solving ability, and intellectual capacity. Although participants frequently stated that academic excellence is not a prerequisite for intelligence, this belief occupied the first peripheral zone rather than the central core, suggesting that intelligence and academic achievement are viewed as related but distinct concepts. Other characteristics, including creativity, emotional self-control, interpersonal relationships, and supportive environmental factors, appeared in the peripheral zones, indicating that these dimensions complement but do not define teachers' collective representation of the intelligent student.

Overall, the findings highlight the predominance of cognitive conceptions of intelligence while showing that broader personal, social, and contextual characteristics occupy a secondary place in teachers' shared representations.

***Keywords*—**Algeria, Intelligent student, Secondary school teachers, Social representations, Teachers' beliefs.

Introduction

Intelligence is a central concept in psychology and education, yet it remains difficult to define and identify (Spearman, 1904; Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985). In schools, teachers make daily judgments about students' intellectual abilities, and these judgments can influence classroom interactions, expectations, and learning opportunities. Understanding how teachers recognize intelligence is therefore important, as their perceptions may shape both educational practices and students' academic experiences (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rubie-Davies, 2015).

Although previous research has examined teachers' beliefs about intelligence, much of this work has focused on whether intelligence is viewed as fixed or malleable and on the educational consequences of these beliefs (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Heyder et al., 2023; Robinson & Bond, 2025). Less attention has been given to the characteristics teachers associate with an intelligent student and to how these characteristics are organized within their shared conceptions of intelligence. Examining these shared conceptions provides a deeper understanding of how intelligence is recognized in everyday classroom contexts.

The present study investigates the social representations of "the intelligent student" among Algerian secondary school teachers. Drawing on Abric's structural approach to Social Representation Theory, it uses the free association method and prototypical analysis to examine how teachers collectively conceptualize intelligence (Abric, 1994, 2005). In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of the shared beliefs that shape how

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teachers recognize and interpret students' intellectual abilities in school.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Intelligence

Despite more than a century of research, intelligence remains a complex construct that has been defined in different ways across psychological theories. Early psychometric approaches viewed intelligence as a general cognitive ability underlying performance across a wide range of mental tasks (Spearman, 1904). This perspective strongly influenced intelligence testing and educational assessment.

Later theories broadened this view. Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences proposed that intelligence comprises several relatively independent abilities, whereas Sternberg's (1985) Triarchic Theory emphasized analytical, creative, and practical intelligence. More recently, Sternberg (2020) has argued that intelligence should be understood as the ability to adapt successfully to changing environments. Although these perspectives differ, they all illustrate that intelligence cannot be reduced to a single, universally accepted definition.

Teachers' Beliefs About Intelligence

Teachers make judgments about students' abilities daily, and these judgments are influenced not only by students' observable performance but also by their own beliefs about intelligence.

Much of the research on teachers' beliefs has been conducted within the framework of implicit theories of intelligence. Dweck (1999, 2006) distinguishes between an entity theory, which views intelligence as relatively fixed, and an incremental theory, which considers it capable of developing through learning and effort. Teachers who endorse a growth-oriented view are generally more likely to adopt supportive instructional practices (Heyder et al., 2023). Teachers' beliefs also influence how they interpret students' abilities, form expectations, and respond to learning and performance (Rubie-Davies, 2015). Jonsson et al. (2012) further argue that these beliefs are shaped by teachers' disciplinary backgrounds and professional training.

Although research on teachers' beliefs about intelligence has improved our understanding of these processes, it provides limited insight into how teachers actually recognize an intelligent student. Knowing whether intelligence is viewed as fixed or malleable does not explain which characteristics teachers associate with intelligence or how they prioritize them. As Robinson and Bond (2025) noted, research has focused primarily on the consequences of teachers' beliefs for classroom practice rather than on the content of those beliefs. Examining teachers' conceptions of the intelligent student therefore helps explain the criteria they use to identify intelligence in the classroom.

Social Representation Theory: The Structural Approach

Social Representation Theory, introduced by Moscovici (1961), explains how groups collectively construct and share knowledge about socially relevant objects. Rather than reflecting individual opinions, social representations emerge through social interaction and are shaped by cultural values, professional experience, and everyday communication (Moscovici, 1961; Rateau et al., 2012).

To explain the internal organization of these representations, Abric (1994, 2005) proposed the structural approach, also known as the Central Core Theory. According to this model, every social representation consists of a central core and a peripheral system. The central core contains the most stable and widely shared elements that give the representation its meaning, whereas the peripheral system is more flexible, incorporating individual experiences and contextual influences. This organization enables members of the same social group to share a common representation while allowing for individual variations (Abric, 1994).

The structural approach has been widely used in psychology, health, and education to examine the organization of shared beliefs and their relationship with social practices (Rateau et al., 2012). In the present study, it provides the theoretical framework for identifying the central and peripheral elements of teachers' social representations of the intelligent student.

Social Representations in Educational Research

Social Representation Theory has been widely applied in educational research to examine teachers' shared understandings of educational phenomena, and recent systematic reviews confirm its growing use in studies of teaching and inclusion (Muñoz-Oyarce et al., 2023; Méndez-Munévar, 2024). Previous studies have explored teachers' social representations of children's learning (Pedditzi & Nonnis, 2020), giftedness (García-Cépero & McCoach, 2009; Pérez et al., 2020; Baquero Gomide et al., 2024), the creative student (Massy et al., 2025), and

sexual diversity (Soria-Barreto et al., 2022). Together, these studies show that shared representations influence how teachers interpret educational issues and inform their professional practice.

The social representation approach helps identify the collective beliefs that guide teachers' judgments while distinguishing between the central and peripheral elements of these beliefs.

Despite its growing application in education, relatively little attention has been paid to teachers' social representations of the intelligent student. Existing research has focused primarily on psychological theories of intelligence, giftedness, or teachers' implicit beliefs, leaving limited knowledge about the characteristics teachers collectively associate with an intelligent student and how these characteristics are organized within the representation.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the content and structure of secondary school teachers' social representations of the intelligent student using Abric's structural approach and the free association method.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative exploratory design grounded in the theory of social representations as developed by Moscovici (1961) and operationalized by Abric (2005). The goal is to identify the implicit structure of teachers' representations of the "intelligent student" through an analysis of free associations and hierarchical ranking. The methodology is particularly suited to uncovering both the explicit and latent elements that form the cognitive and affective content of teachers' beliefs.

Participants

The participants in this study were 22 secondary school teachers from a secondary school located in Setif, eastern Algeria. The teachers who participated taught various scientific subjects and had varying levels of professional experience. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

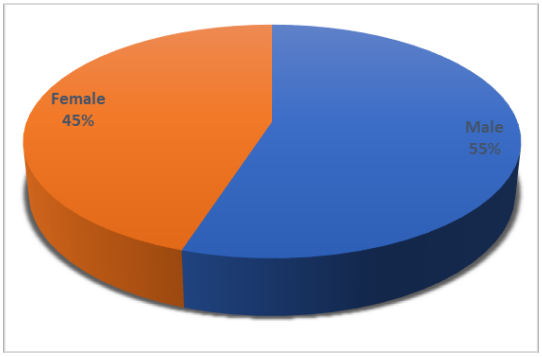


Figure 1. Distribution of teachers by gender

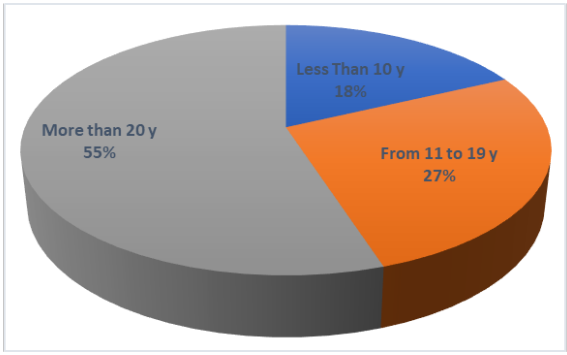


Figure 2. Distribution of teachers according to years of teaching experience

Importantly, a significant portion of the sample had substantial professional experience: 55% of the teachers had over 20 years of teaching experience, bringing a depth of pedagogical practice and long-term exposure to the educational system.

Data Collection Procedure: Abric's Free Association Method

According to Abric (1994), free association consists of starting from an inducing word and asking participants to produce all the words that spontaneously come to mind.

We followed the methodological approach proposed by Abric (2005), which allows for identifying the structure of a social representation and its central core.

To elicit the content and structure of teachers' social representations of the intelligent student, we followed the two-step procedure developed by Abric:

1. Free Association Phase Teachers were presented with the inductor phrase:
   "What comes to mind when you think of an intelligent student?"
   They were asked to list spontaneously the words, expressions, or characteristics that came to mind.
2. Hierarchical Ranking Phase After listing the associations, teachers were asked to rank the terms they had produced in order of importance, assigning "1" to the most important and continuing sequentially.

This two-stage method enables the extraction of both:

- Frequency (how often an item appears across participants)
- Importance (subjective value assigned to each item)

The cross-tabulation of these two criteria allowed us to categorize terms into four quadrants, following Abric's framework:

Case 1: Central core (high frequency, high importance)

This zone generally contains the central core of the representation, along with prototypical or closely related elements. Not every element in this quadrant belongs to the central core; however, the central core is expected to be located within this zone.

Case 2: First periphery (high frequency, low importance)

This zone contains frequently occurring peripheral elements that support and reinforce the central core of the social representation.

Case 3: Contrasted elements (low frequency, high importance)

This zone includes elements that are considered important but are mentioned by only a small number of participants. These elements may complement those found in the first peripheral zone. However, for a small subgroup of participants, the central core of the representation may also emerge in this zone.

Case 4: Second periphery (low frequency, low importance)

This zone includes elements that are considered less important and have a lower frequency of occurrence.

Data Calculation and Processing

The data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, semantically similar responses were grouped into unified conceptual categories (e.g., quick analysis and fast thinker were combined under a single concept). Second, a prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992) was performed to identify the structure of the social representation using the mean frequency and the mean importance score (MIS) as threshold values. This procedure made it possible to identify not only the elements associated with intelligence by teachers but also the structural organization of these elements, distinguishing those that occupied the central core from those belonging to the peripheral zones of the representation.

An element is considered to have a high frequency if its frequency is greater than or equal to the mean frequency of all identified elements. Conversely, an element is considered to have a low frequency if its frequency is below the mean frequency.

An element is considered important when its mean importance score is greater than or equal to the average of the mean importance scores of all the elements. Conversely, an element is considered less important if its mean importance score is below this average.

To calculate the mean importance score for each item, the importance value assigned to an element by each participant was divided by the total number of elements generated by that participant. These weighted values were then summed across all participants who mentioned the item. Finally, this sum was divided by the item's frequency.

The mean importance score (MIS) for item i was calculated using the following formula:

$$MIS_i=(\sum_{j=1}^{f_i}(I_{ij}/N_j))/f_i$$

Where:

- MIS_i= Mean Importance Score of item i
- I_{ij}= importance value assigned by participant j to item i
- N_j= total number of elements evoked by participant j
- f_i= frequency of item i

Example: Calculation of the mean importance score for the item High Attention and Concentration was calculated as follows:

$$MIS=((2/6)+(4/4)+(1/6)+(2/6)+(2/8)+(3/6)+(4/10))/7=2.98/7=0.42$$

Therefore, the mean importance score (MIS) of the item "High Attention and Concentration" was 0.42.

Results

The application of Abric's method of free associations followed by hierarchical ranking allowed us to identify the content and structure of teachers' social representations of the "intelligent student." A total of 95 initial associations were collected from the 22 teachers. After removing single-occurrence items and grouping semantically similar expressions, we obtained a final set of 23 distinct categories.

Frequency of Associations

The most frequently mentioned associations were:

Table1: The most frequently mentioned associations

Associated Term / Expression	Frequency	Percentage
Rapid analysis and conclusion drawing	16	16.84%
Promptness	14	14.73%
High attention and concentration	7	7.36%
Problem-solving efficiency	6	6.31%
Academic excellence is not required	6	6.31%
Intellectual and mental capacity	5	5.26%
Organized and disciplined	4	4.21%
Others (e.g., creativity, memory, emotional control)	≤3	≤3.15%

This first step allowed us to identify the most commonly evoked traits that teachers link to intelligence, particularly cognitive speed, concentration, and efficiency.

Hierarchical Ranking of Importance

Teachers were then asked to rank their own associations by importance. The most highly ranked items (lowest average score = highest importance) were:

Table 2: The most highly ranked items

Term / Expression	Mean Importance Scores
Hyperactive or calm	0.17
Promptness	0.26
Attentive parents	0.35
Intellectual and mental capacity	0.36
Environmental adaptation	0.39
Disciplined and organized	0.39
High attention and concentration	0.42

This step provides insight into which attributes teachers personally value most when defining a student as intelligent, whether or not these attributes are frequently shared among the group.

Prototypical Analysis: Structure of the Social Representation

By crossing the frequency of occurrence with the mean importance score, and using the thresholds recommended by Abric's structural approach, the evoked elements were organized into the four representational zones of the social representation.

A. Central Core: (High frequency × High importance) F ≥ 4,34 % and MIS < 0,53

The central core comprises the most stable and consensual elements of the representation. According to Abric (1994), these elements define the meaning and organization of the social representation and are resistant to change.

The central core identified in this study includes:

- Rapidity in analysis and conclusion drawing (16, 84%; 0,50)
- Promptness (14,73%; 0,26)
- High attention and concentration (7,36%; 0,42)
- Effective problem-solving (6,31%; 0,43)
- Intellectual and mental capacity (5,26%; 0,36)

These elements constitute the defining characteristics of the teachers' social representation of an intelligent student. They represent the fundamental and non-negotiable attributes that organize the representation. Consequently, a student characterized by slowness, distractibility, poor concentration, difficulties in problem-solving, and limited intellectual or mental abilities would not be perceived as intelligent within this representational framework.

Furthermore, the elements of the central core determine the evaluative orientation of the representation. Since all the central elements identified in this study describe desirable cognitive characteristics, the teachers' social representation of the intelligent student is predominantly positive.

B. First Periphery: (High frequency × Low importance) F ≥ 4,34 % and MIS ≥ 0,53

The first peripheral system contains elements that are frequently mentioned but considered less important than those of the central core. Unlike the central core, peripheral elements are more flexible, context-dependent, and open to change. They enrich the representation without defining it.

Only one element appeared in the first peripheral zone:

- Academic excellence is not a requirement. (6,31%; 0,71)

Although this idea was frequently expressed by participants, it received a relatively low importance score. This suggests that many teachers recognize that outstanding academic achievement is not a necessary condition for considering a student intelligent. While this belief complements the overall representation, it does not constitute one of its defining characteristics.

C. Contrasted Elements: (Low frequency × High importance) F < 4,34 % and MIS < 0,53

The contrasted elements consist of characteristics that are considered highly important by a relatively small number of participants. According to Abric, these elements may represent the central core of the social representation for a particular subgroup within the population.

The contrasted elements identified in this study include:

- Disciplined and organized behavior (4,21%; 0,39)
- Hyperactive or calm temperament (4,21%; 0,17)
- Attentive parents (2,10%; 0,35)
- Good memory (2,10%; 0,45)
- Intelligence as a gift from God (2,10%; 0,51)
- Will and perseverance (2,10%; 0,40)
- Good adaptation to the environment (2,10%; 0,39)

These findings suggest that some teachers place particular emphasis on behavioral, familial, motivational, or environmental factors when defining intelligence. Although these elements are not shared by the majority of participants, they may reflect alternative representational systems held by specific subgroups of teachers.

D. Second Periphery: (Low frequency × Low importance) F < 4,34 % and MIS ≥ 0,53

The second peripheral system comprises the most marginal elements of the representation. These elements are characterized by both low frequency and low importance and therefore contribute little to the collective definition of the intelligent student.

The second peripheral zone includes:

- Creativity (3,15%; 0,65)
- Educational upbringing (3,15%; 0, 82)
- Interpersonal relationships (3,15%; 0,60)
- Psychological stability (2,10%; 0,62)
- Curiosity (2,10%; 0,55)
- Strange or different (2,10%; 0,60)
- Positive thinking (2,10%; 0,53)
- Supportive environment (2,10%; 0,87)
- Emotional intelligence (2,10%; 1)
- Talent (2,10%; 0,68)

Although these characteristics were mentioned by a small number of teachers, they do not play a significant role in the collective social representation of intelligence and cannot be considered defining features of the intelligent student.

Discussion

A Cognitive Representation of Intelligence

The central core of teachers' social representation consisted exclusively of cognitive characteristics, including rapid reasoning, attention and concentration, problem-solving ability, and intellectual capacity. According to Abric's (1994) structural approach, the central core contains the most stable and widely shared elements of a social representation and defines the meaning of its object. The predominance of these characteristics therefore indicates a strong consensus that intelligence is primarily expressed through cognitive functioning.

This finding is consistent with traditional psychometric theories, which identify reasoning and problem-solving as core components of intelligence (Spearman, 1904; Carroll, 1993). It also supports previous research showing that teachers tend to associate intelligence with cognitive abilities (Patterson et al., 2016). Likewise, Hamilton and Jaap (2024) found that although pre-service teachers held diverse conceptions of intelligence, cognitive ability remained a central reference in their understanding of the construct.

One explanation for this emphasis may lie in teachers' professional experience. More than half of the participants in the present study had over 20 years of teaching experience, during which cognitive processes such as reasoning, concentration, and rapid comprehension were likely to become the most visible indicators of students' engagement and learning. From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, these repeated professional experiences contribute to the formation and stabilization of shared beliefs within a social group (Moscovici, 1961; Abric, 1994).

Although contemporary theories have expanded the concept of intelligence to include creative, practical, emotional, and social dimensions (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985, 2020), these dimensions did not occupy the central core of teachers' representation. Instead, intelligence continued to be defined primarily through cognitive efficiency, suggesting that cognitive abilities remain the principal reference point through which teachers recognize an intelligent student in everyday classroom practice.

Intelligence Beyond Academic Achievement

One of the most notable findings of this study is that teachers distinguished intelligence from academic achievement. The semantic category indicating that academic excellence is not a prerequisite for intelligence appeared in the first peripheral zone, suggesting that this belief was widely shared but did not define the representation itself (Abric, 1994). Although teachers primarily associated intelligence with reasoning, attention, and problem-solving, they recognized that intellectual ability is not always reflected in students' grades or school performance.

This finding is consistent with research showing that academic achievement depends on a combination of cognitive and non-cognitive factors, including motivation, learning strategies, emotional well-being, and contextual influences (Richardson et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 2016). Similarly, Kaya et al. (2023) found that prospective teachers viewed intelligence as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond academic performance, suggesting that educational success represents only one possible expression of intellectual ability.

From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, the position of this category within the first peripheral zone illustrates the adaptive role of peripheral elements (Abric, 1994). It allows teachers to acknowledge students whose intellectual potential is not fully reflected in their academic results while preserving a representation in which cognitive functioning remains the defining feature of intelligence.

Alternative Conceptions of the Intelligent Student

Although the central core revealed a strong consensus around cognitive characteristics, the contrasted elements suggest that some teachers hold broader conceptions of the intelligent student. According to Abric (1994), contrasted elements may represent the central representation of a subgroup rather than the dominant view.

Several of these elements extend beyond cognitive abilities. Characteristics such as discipline, organization, perseverance, attentive parents, adaptation to the environment, and good memory indicate that some teachers also associate intelligence with behavioral, motivational, and contextual factors. Although these elements were mentioned by relatively few participants, they reflect alternative ways of understanding intelligence within the teaching community.

One contrasted element was particularly distinctive: the belief that intelligence is a gift from God. Unlike the other responses, this reflects a cultural or spiritual interpretation rather than a psychological or educational one. Although mentioned by only a few teachers, it illustrates that social representations are shaped not only by professional experience but also by the broader cultural context (Moscovici, 1961).

Overall, these findings suggest that while teachers largely share a cognitive representation of the intelligent student, broader behavioral, contextual, and cultural perspectives also coexist, illustrating the diversity of beliefs within the same professional group.

Beyond Cognitive Intelligence

The second peripheral zone introduced a range of non-cognitive characteristics, including creativity, emotional self-control, curiosity, psychological stability, supportive educational and family environments, interpersonal relationships, and talent. Although these characteristics were recognized by some teachers, they remained peripheral, indicating that they complement rather than define the representation of the intelligent student (Abric, 1994).

The peripheral position of creativity and emotional intelligence is particularly noteworthy. Contemporary theories view intelligence as encompassing creative, practical, interpersonal, and emotional dimensions (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985). In contrast, the teachers in this study continued to define intelligence primarily through cognitive abilities, suggesting that broader dimensions play a secondary role in their judgments. Similarly, Massy et al. (2025) found that future teachers' social representations of the creative student combined cognitive and creative attributes, illustrating that conceptions of student characteristics extend beyond purely academic abilities while remaining shaped by shared educational beliefs.

Interestingly, a few teachers associated intelligence with being different from others, linking it to unconventionality. However, its peripheral position indicates that this view is not widely shared.

Educational Implications

The findings suggest that teachers primarily identify intelligence through reasoning, attention, and problem-solving. While these abilities are central to learning, such an emphasis may make it more difficult to recognize students whose strengths are expressed through creativity, emotional competence, or interpersonal skills. This highlights the importance of encouraging broader conceptions of intelligence in teacher education. Integrating perspectives that recognize creative, practical, and emotional dimensions of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985) may help teachers identify a wider range of student abilities. In support of this view, Baquero Gomide et al. (2024) found that teacher education contributed to broader representations of giftedness, suggesting that professional training can promote more inclusive ways of recognizing students' intellectual potential.

Conclusion

This study examined teachers' social representations of the intelligent student using the structural approach to Social Representation Theory. The findings show that teachers primarily define intelligence through cognitive characteristics, particularly reasoning, attention, concentration, problem-solving, and intellectual capacity. These elements formed the stable core of the representation and reflected a shared understanding of what it means to be an intelligent student.

At the same time, the representation was not limited to cognitive abilities alone. Teachers distinguished intelligence from academic achievement and, although less consistently, associated it with personal, emotional, social, and contextual characteristics. However, these dimensions remained peripheral, suggesting that they complement rather than define teachers' collective understanding of intelligence.

Exploring these shared representations contributes to a better understanding of how intelligence is perceived within educational settings and highlights the complexity of teachers' conceptualizations of the intelligent student.

Within the teachers' social representation identified in this study, the intelligent student is first and foremost a student who thinks efficiently. Other personal, emotional, and contextual characteristics enrich this representation, but they do not define it.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that teacher education programs should provide greater opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own beliefs about intelligence. Such reflection may encourage a broader understanding of the different ways students' abilities can be expressed in the classroom and help teachers recognize strengths that extend beyond traditional cognitive indicators.

Given that teachers in the present study distinguished intelligence from academic achievement, schools may also benefit from assessment and classroom practices that acknowledge multiple forms of student ability rather than relying primarily on academic performance as an indicator of intelligence. Promoting a more comprehensive understanding of students' strengths may contribute to more inclusive educational practices.

Future research should examine teachers' social representations of intelligence across different educational levels, school contexts, and cultural settings to determine how these representations vary according to professional and social environments. Combining structural approaches, such as free association and prototypical analysis, with qualitative methods would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers construct and justify their beliefs about intelligence. In addition, longitudinal and comparative studies could explore how teachers' representations evolve over the course of their careers and whether professional development or educational reforms contribute to changes in these representations. Such research would not only deepen our understanding of teachers' beliefs about intelligence but also clarify how these beliefs shape educational practices and students' learning experiences.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of 22 secondary school teachers from a single school in Setif, Algeria. Consequently, the findings reflect the social representations of this specific group and should not be generalized to all teachers or educational contexts.

Second, the study relied on the free association technique and prototypical analysis, which are well suited to identifying the structure of social representations. However, these methods do not explore in depth the reasons underlying participants' associations. Complementary qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide a richer understanding of how teachers construct their conceptions of the intelligent student.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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Generative AI Statement

As the authors of this work, we used the generative AI tool ChatGPT for translation and to improve the grammar, clarity, and style of parts of the manuscript. All AI-assisted suggestions were carefully reviewed and verified before being incorporated into the final version. We take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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