



## Social representations of social science teacher trainees on freedom of expression

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**ABSTRACT.** The present study addresses the social representations of teachers in training in the social sciences, mainly from the perspective of freedom of expression. It is essential to address this issue, especially when currently there is evidence of the resurgence of populism and a democratic crisis, related to freedom of expression. The research is positioned from a qualitative perspective through a case study. An activity dossier, focus groups, biographical narratives and interviews are used as data production techniques. In relation to the main results, it can be said that, like the teacher in training, Ramírez et al. (2017), have raised that the protection to people should not be left aside, although there has to be free expression, it cannot be validated if it attempts against fundamental freedoms, in this case the dignity of people exposed in the media. Lara et al. (n.d.), also agree that, beyond the legal sphere, the right to privacy is valid and it must be respected, and the corresponding sanctions must be applied, since basically not respecting the privacy of individuals is to interfere in their private life.

**Keywords:** hate speech; media; social networks; citizenship education; citizen education; human rights.

## Representaciones sociales del profesorado de ciencias sociales en formación sobre la libertad de expresión

**RESUMEN.** El presente estudio aborda las representaciones sociales del profesorado en formación de ciencias sociales, principalmente desde una perspectiva de la libertad de expresión. Es fundamental abordar esta temática, sobre todo cuando en la actualidad se ha evidenciado el resurgimiento de los populismos y una crisis democrática relacionada a la libertad de expresión. La investigación se posiciona desde una perspectiva cualitativa a través del estudio de caso. Se utiliza como técnica de producción de datos un dossier de actividades, grupos focales, narrativas biográficas y entrevistas. En relación con los principales resultados, se puede decir que, al igual que el profesorado en formación, Ramírez et al. (2017), han planteado que no se debe dejar de lado la protección a las personas que, si bien ha de existir una libre expresión, ésta no se puede validar si atenta en contra de las libertades fundamentales, en este caso de la dignidad de las personas expuestas en los medios de comunicación. Lara et al. (n.d.), también están de acuerdo con que, más allá del ámbito legal, el derecho a la privacidad es válido y que, como tal, se debe respetar y aplicar las sanciones que correspondan, ya que básicamente no respetar la privacidad de las personas es inmiscuirse en su vida privada.

**Palabras-clave:** discurso de odio; medios de comunicación; redes sociales; educación para la ciudadanía; formación ciudadana; Derechos Humanos.

## Representações sociais de professores de ciências sociais em formação sobre liberdade de expressão

**RESUMO.** Este estudo trata das representações sociais de professores em formação em ciências sociais, principalmente do ponto de vista da liberdade de expressão. É fundamental abordar essa questão, principalmente quando se evidencia o ressurgimento do populismo e uma crise democrática relacionada à liberdade de expressão. A pesquisa posiciona-se numa perspectiva qualitativa através do estudo de caso. Um dossiê de atividades, grupos focais, narrativas biográficas e entrevistas são utilizadas como técnica de produção de dados. Em relação aos principais resultados, pode-se dizer que, assim como os professores em formação, Ramírez, González, e Goyo (2017), afirmaram que não se deve descuidar da proteção das pessoas que, embora deva haver liberdade de expressão, esta não pode ser validado se violar as liberdades fundamentais, neste caso a dignidade das pessoas expostas na mídia. Lara, Pincheira, e Vera (n.d.), também concordam que, para além da esfera legal, o direito à privacidade é válido e que, como tal, as sanções correspondentes devem ser respeitadas e aplicadas, pois basicamente não respeitar a privacidade das pessoas é intrometer-se na sua vida privada.

**Palavras-chave:** discurso de ódio; meios de comunicação; redes sociais; educação para a cidadania; educação cidadã; direitos humanos.

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## Introduction

A situation accompanying the resurgence of populisms and the democratic crisis in many countries is the emergence of issues related to freedom of expression. On one hand, there are concerns about its limits in a democracy, and on the other hand, there is the proliferation of hate speech in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, aporophobia, etc. (Parekh, 2012; Kaufman, 2015; Cortina, 2017; Massip-Sabater et al., 2022). Lastly, it is important not to confuse freedom of expression with manipulation or the lack of truthfulness in the media's information.

The present research is situated in the field of the didactics of social sciences and focuses on the social representations of trainee teachers regarding freedom of expression. The research investigates emerging themes such as hate speech and the limits that must be established, using the right to freedom of expression as a foundation. Considering the findings of the research, on this occasion, we have wanted to delve deeper into the social representations of social science trainee teachers and evaluate how students, from the criteria of freedom of expression, interpret information about relevant social problems (Santisteban-Fernández, 2019; 2022).

This study is positioned in the field of Education for Citizenship and focuses on the analysis of a deep understanding of the concept of democracy, understanding that, from their role as educational and political subjects, trainee teachers will need to think, design, and implement educational experiences that allow a deeper understanding of democracy as a political model, but above all as a social project in which everyone should participate. To do this, it is necessary for trainee teachers, through their training process, to develop civic competencies and, in turn, professional competencies associated with teaching for civic education.

## Why is freedom of expression important in education for citizenship?

We believe that due to the political and social transformations of the last 10 years, it is necessary to investigate the representations of trainee teachers about democracy, as well as the direct link it has with the commitment to the dissemination and protection of Human Rights. The last few years have been marked by profound changes in the world due to processes such as economic, political, or war-related migrations. To this are added the deep social mobilizations that have taken place in the last three years against a political and social model that seems to have strengthened a scenario of inequality. The pandemic has only served to highlight the deep inequalities in our society. This scenario leads us to propose the need to deepen the value of democracy from the training of teachers, understanding that they will be key players in the socialization of this model in the educational contexts in which they operate.

It is necessary to understand the concept of democracy from its complexity, understanding that it does not only correspond to a political model, but rather is associated with a way of life or a societal project that is in constant construction and that, therefore, it is the responsibility of all citizens to participate in its promotion, defense, and improvement. This is what will allow understanding why today, countries that declare themselves as democratic, show situations where Human Rights such as freedom of expression are violated or hate speech that threatens the dignity of individuals is spread. This is what leads us to ask, what is required for a democracy to function under the protection of Human Rights and to effectively safeguard the human dignity of its citizens?

Today, populisms try to control public opinion, and in this process, the media plays a fundamental role (Fernández, 2019), as they can promote misinformation and spread rumors that end up being established as truths (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). It must also be considered that there is a clear ideology in each medium of information (Van Dijk, 1996) and, therefore, there is an intentionality in the decisions about which part of the story to tell or from what point of view.

Another key element is social networks and digital platforms, where there are basically no effective filters to respect or safeguard human dignity (Cabo and García, 2017). That is, it must be considered that lies and hate speech become easier to spread through a certain anonymity that social networks provide us (Santisteban-Fernández, Díez-Bedmar, & Castellví, 2020). For these reasons, it is fundamental to work on topics such as freedom of expression with trainee teachers, to know their experiences, their ideas about the

limits of freedom of expression and hate speech, since we consider that this will influence the moment when they must generate educational experiences or classroom practices that counteract anti-democratic attitudes (Gómez-Saldivia, 2020).

The research is developed from a qualitative perspective, using the case study as the method of analysis. This case corresponds to the students of the Pedagogy in History and Social Sciences program at a private university in the city of Santiago, Chile. A dossier of activities, focus groups, biographical narratives, and interviews are used as techniques for data production. Participants in the research process were trainee teachers and university professors of Citizenship Education and History subjects.

Through the dossier of activities, written and visual sources are presented as support for the questions. The instrument has been divided into 5 items addressing topics such as social representations on the concept of freedom of expression, limits, the role of social networks, and the responsibility to argue opinions, among others. The focus group has addressed questions that aim to delve deeper into the most relevant themes arising from the first instrument applied. The biographical narrative requested a description of a positive and a negative experience regarding freedom of expression, considering personal, family, academic life, etc. The interview consists of 7 questions, aimed at deepening the importance of freedom of expression in the context of the pandemic and virtual education.

Next, we present the results of the research, based on the triangulation of the different instruments used. The dossier of activities allows us to have written data based on the questions posed and the issues to be resolved. These data are triangulated with the rest of the qualitative instruments, such as focus groups, narratives, and interviews. This triangulation allows us to ensure the veracity of the results in interpretative nature research. It also allows us to ensure the reliability of the research due to the large amount of data collected from the same people investigated, an indispensable characteristic in an in-depth case study (Yin, 2001; Stake, 2007; Stott & Ramil, 2014).

## **Trainee Teachers: Freedom of Expression, Limits, and Hate Speech**

One of the main topics that has emerged from the analysis of the research results is the limits of freedom of expression. Initially, the trainee teachers did not refer to clear limits, only stating that one person's freedom ends where another's begins. These opinions were mainly expressed in the focus group. That is, comments made must be respectful and must not infringe upon another person. In contrast, at least in legal terms, Ramirez (n.d.) has indicated that freedom of expression cannot be validated from a perspective that affects a person's dignity and honor, and that it should be encouraged in public spaces, but with the corresponding legal precautions.

Through the focus group, we have been able to delve deeper into this first approach, which has allowed the teachers to recognize that the limits of freedom of expression are associated with behaviors related to racism, homophobia, violence, among others. However, it is interesting to analyze that they recognize freedom of expression as a Human Right, yet they do not refer to its limits being drawn from the perspective of respect and promotion of these rights.

Another relevant element, in the context of the exercise of freedom of expression and its limits, is related to people's privacy. In item 2 of the dossier of activities, a series of news stories were presented where people's privacy was not respected, and at this point, the trainee teachers were critical. That is, although they understand the freedom of expression that the media has, they do not agree that it should question the private life of people who have been publicly exposed.

Just like the trainee teachers, Ramirez et al. (2017), have suggested that protection of individuals should not be overlooked, and that while free expression must exist, it cannot be validated if it infringes upon fundamental freedoms, in this case, the dignity of the people exposed in the media. Lara et al. (n.d.) also agree that, beyond the legal scope, the right to privacy is valid and as such, should be respected and the corresponding sanctions applied, since basically not respecting people's privacy means intruding into their private lives.

Hate speech has been another important issue that has emerged directly from the trainee teachers themselves. Although they have declared to understand the value of free expression in a democratic society, they are also aware that this freedom cannot be linked to fostering hate speech. However, Soto (2015) points out that at the international agreement level there is no clear definition of hate speech, hence it is complex to find the line between the valid exercise of the right to free expression and the limit where hate speech begins to be fostered. In this area, despite recognizing the importance of not validating hate speech, if there

is no legal and international definition, there are few tools to sanction individuals and/or groups that spread hate through their free expression.

During the development of the focus group, the trainee teachers also indicated the need to move towards a society that understands the importance of not using freedom of expression to impose ideologies and that, in addition, the media should strive not to foster hate speech. "I believe, as I said, democracy implies respect, dialogue among all, empathy, but not necessarily agreement; respect is also based on and sustained by differences," (Participant No. 1). It is important to highlight that the approaches to hate speech are consistent with how participants interpret this concept.

The trainee teachers have referred to hate speech through the comments made in the media and social networks. These are means by which people tend to discredit others, with the assurance of having the freedom to express their ideas. In this context, they point out that, while one may have the right to free expression, it should not be confused with humiliating others nor with the aim of imposing political and/or religious ideologies. "Freedom of expression has a series of difficulties in terms of the understanding we give to the concept of 'freedom,' and in that sense, understand that, like in other areas, it is not simply about saying (or doing) whatever one wants, but saying as much as possible socially, when this does not violently harm the rest of society," (Participant No. 2).

Why is it important not to validate hate speech? The turning points have been item 2 of the dossier of activities (where the news about a counter-march by the Patriotic Social Movement against the pro-abortion march was presented); item 4 of the dossier of activities (where they were asked to take a position on teaching a topic about transgender issues); and a question from the focus group (which addresses how to teach a controversial and current topic). Through the results obtained, it has been shown that the teachers understand the cultural and social diversity that exists in Chilean classrooms.

Considering the importance of teaching for cultural diversity is key in the positioning of trainee teachers. Like Riedemann and Stefoni (2015), who also agree that issues such as racism are part of the problematic reality of today's school. The authors propose that it is necessary to move towards a democratic education, for social justice. From this perspective, recognizing cultural diversity allows progress towards a society for democracy.

Moreover, Riedemann and Stefoni (2015) indicate that, to advance in the construction of a democratic society, social inequalities must first be recognized. Positioning oneself from a critical perspective is part of the role that should be played by social science teachers, as declared by the trainee teachers, both in the focus group and in the interviews conducted. "Nowadays, educational establishments do not have, for example, the flag of struggle to privilege the freedom of expression of their students and under that precept, we are going to find that there is no integrity of the concept and consequently it is impossible for it to be taken as something transversal, what do I mean by this, that it will be extremely common for those who test, for example, freedom of expression to be those teachers who generally allow more critical thinking," (Participant No. 5).

From the results obtained from the focus group, the role of social science teachers, who should encourage and ensure that freedom of expression is practiced in the classroom, also emerged. "I believe that we, the teachers, are the ones called for this, mainly because nowadays there is a need to carry out a civic education, for me the topic of free expression is also linked to participation," (Participant No. 10). However, the trainee teachers also point out that the teacher's commitment is not enough if there is no support from the schools and even from the parents and guardians.

It is understood then, that through joint social and educational work, hate speech can be avoided while respecting the right to free expression. This is what new research being carried out in the field of social studies and democratic education points to (Arroyo et al., 2018).

## **Trainee Teachers: The Role of Media and Social Networks**

Through the application of the dossier of activities, it has been evidenced that the trainee teachers recognize social exposure to media and social networks. In a globalized world scenario, the use of the Internet and digital media in daily life is undeniable. The perspective offered by the trainee teachers is reaffirmed by Ross and Vinson (2012), who indicate that contemporary society is exposed to technology.

Furthermore, there is a relationship between the results obtained in the dossier of activities and what Ross and Vinson (2012) have stated regarding the society of the spectacle; they suggest that through social networks, individuals reflect more of what they wish to present about themselves rather than what they truly

are. Addressing this comment, the trainee teachers have indicated that although social networks are useful and necessary for digital coexistence and communication, they partially have a negative impact when those who emit harmful or unsubstantiated comments hide behind anonymity. “Yes, I believe that social networks encourage free expression, the bad thing is that behind the computer one does not measure the caliber of things that can be expressed, and therefore, these can incite hatred,” (Participant No. 7). This is also affirmed by Simelio and Gayá (2014), indicating that the most worrying aspect of digital media are anonymous comments.

Indeed, both in the dossier of activities, as well as in the focus group and the interviews conducted with the trainee teachers, they have declared the importance of the media and social networks as mediums for freedom of expression. However, they maintain a critical attitude towards misuse, manipulation, and a lack of skills to handle information. “I feel that the media regarding the pandemic are super manipulated; there is no clear information, no precise information... I feel that everything is manipulated and that nobody really knows what the figures are. I also feel that essential issues such as the consequences of lockdown, of quarantine, for example, unemployment, and a lot of issues that are seen more on social networks than in the media, such as the press or television channels, then I do not believe that there is freedom of expression. For example, the morning shows all tackle a problem from the same perspective, the usual panelists, with the usual politicians who are not doing their job but are on the morning show, so people are no longer interested in believing the media,” (Participant No. 7). Like Santisteban-Fernández and González-Valencia (2013), who propose that for a good use of digital media it is fundamental to have the necessary skills, such as reflective and critical thinking.

Specifically, in the results obtained in the focus group, the trainee teachers declare not to trust 100% the information that circulates through digital media, including television and newspapers. Referring to the fact that the media can be manipulated according to the convenience of the current government or the owners of these outlets. “First, to recognize that this effectively responds in some way to the duopoly that exists today between the media, it's a matter of checking in fact that the only medium that somehow deals with it in an almost local way is 'El Llanquihue', which is a rather independent newspaper, not so with 'El Austral' which depends on 'El Mercurio', 'Las Últimas Noticias' which also depends on 'El Mercurio'... there is 'La Cuarta' which is from Copesa, which are part of this communication duopoly that exists in this country, which ultimately is able to permeate people's perception of the news in some way,” (Participant No. 5). This is also made explicit by the participants of the interviews with the trainee teachers, mentioning that, during the pandemic, they have not witnessed real freedom of expression. “I feel that the media do not respond to what really, so to speak, the people should have... I feel that they are totally framed by the topics that the editorials they work with respond to, be it newspaper, television, whatever the medium, it satisfactorily responds to the editorial or the body that composes them,” (Participant No. 20).

In another area, Camps (2009) has proposed that it is necessary to educate for the correct use of virtual media. Although this has not been explicitly declared in the results obtained, it has been inferred that, indeed, the trainee teachers require tools and skills that allow them a good use of digital media. However, the central skill must be critical thinking, understood from a reflective perspective that allows taking actions on the matter, that is, that it is not just a cognitive exercise.

It is also worth noting that the trainee teachers interviewed have declared the importance that social networks have had in the context of the pandemic. Participant No. 1 (category 1) states that “the new generations use more... Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, so one may fall for information that is not entirely reliable. It must be questioned because sometimes it is not known if they are true, but there, clearly, one learns through education to always verify that this information is reliable to be able to support and back it up.”

While Participant No. 2 (category 1) affirms “I feel that there is no freedom of expression in the media, in fact, today I read something about them censoring alternative press, I have not been able to see it well, but I read a publication from an independent newspaper that said they were being censored.” This in the context of the role of the media, in the management of information during the pandemic.

Regarding the school, the media, and social networks, the trainee teachers are critical of the questions raised about freedom of expression in these spaces. Like Camps (2009), the trainee teachers indicate that the school plays a relevant role, however, if a commitment from the entire educational community is not evident, there will be shortcomings surrounding effective freedom of expression.

On this point, school and free expression, the trainee teachers have been very clear through the biographical narrative, indicating that in schools they have not had good experiences in relation to freedom

of expression. The main reason is that their opinion has not been valued because they are not of legal age (18 years old) and that, as children and young people, they have not had enough life experience to opine on a topic.

Even in the focus group and the interviews conducted with the trainee teachers, they have declared that in schools there is no real freedom of expression, since, from their practical experiences, they have seen it limited. The factors that determine this limitation range from the curriculum, the directive of the educational establishment, the same teachers and social science teachers, and even from the parents and guardians.

Regarding the emergence of the Internet, like Simelio and Gayá (2014), the trainee teachers have declared that they agree with its use, as these new digital tools are part of everyday living and if used correctly, allow students not only to use it to obtain information but also to express themselves and generate their own content.

Now, Sánchez (2017) indicates that, for the use of social networks such as Facebook, there must be norms that protect users, not only from the web platform but also from State aspects. In relation to this point, in the dossier of activities, the trainee teachers have noted that there is no adequate filter for the comments made by individuals and even political authorities through media like Facebook or Twitter.

In connection with the topic of participation in social networks, Paiva and Triviño (2014) also suggest that virtual reality is no longer just a means of communication but has become an extension of people's everyday lives. For this reason, the trainee teachers have indicated through various activities of the first instrument that self-regulation should be sought regarding the comments made on these virtual platforms.

## **Trainee Teachers: The Rise of Populism and Critical Thinking**

Trainee teachers have recognized the importance of the teacher's role in teaching social sciences. Mainly, from the perspective of educating young people who must have access to different viewpoints regarding History and be capable of developing their own criteria. That is why they consider having a responsibility, especially in this new social context where populisms have had a considerable surge. When we talk about populisms, it is worth noting that we refer to authoritarian proposals, validated through the exercise of opinions and actions that violate others.

Regarding the results obtained in the focus group, it is mentioned that social science teachers have an important responsibility not only to develop cognitive skills but also to enhance freedom of expression in the classroom and to take a stance on social issues.

Another group participating in this research corresponds to university teachers. From the interviews conducted, we have recognized that this group declares that the role of social science teachers should be to promote freedom of expression, both in form and substance, and to achieve this, they must first encourage the development of skills such as critical thinking and the ability to communicate their ideas. These approaches appear to align with what the Mineduc (2016) declares through the curricular guidelines, regarding the Civic Education Plan and the skills required for effective democratic coexistence.

In relation to the teacher's role, Jacobs and Meza (2013) are more radical in their statements, indicating that the process of educating means to liberate the oppressed. It is essential that social science teachers position themselves from a critical and even transformative perspective when thinking, designing, and implementing educational experiences.

Although the application of the dossier, the interview, and the focus group provides evidence on the relevance that the trainee teachers assign to teaching social sciences from a critical perspective, when analyzing their classroom practices, it is possible to recognize differences between what is said and what is done. That is, part of the teaching staff is consistent between what they say they do and what they describe they would do (through methodologies and resources), but another part of the trainee teachers, despite believing in an emancipatory education, end up positioning themselves pedagogically in a traditional methodology.

Furthermore, through the results of the focus group and interviews, the trainee teachers recognize the responsibility that social science teachers have. Not only in the teaching of content but above all in the development of skills to form a critical citizenry. Similarly, Pérez (2012) understands that, in the educational process, it is the social science teachers who have the responsibility to educate for a better future. To progress from an individualistic citizenship to one that is involved in improving society for the common good.

What Pérez (2012) proposes slightly differs from what is indicated by the trainee teachers, mainly in the results obtained in the focus group. In this instance, the teachers have recognized their responsibility but have indicated that it will not be effective for them to be interested in generating change if this is not

accompanied by public policies and commitment from the entire educational community. This type of positioning may be since these trainee teachers have had 2 to 3 educational practice experiences, therefore, their role in the classroom (so far) has been that of a student teacher, hence, they have not had the necessary autonomy to make curricular, pedagogical, and didactic decisions.

Prieto (2007) has positioned himself from a critical perspective against teacher professionalization in Chile, declaring that while the teacher's role has adapted to the demands of society, it is still not understood or even valued by the State. This perception is also shared according to the results obtained in the instruments applied to the trainee teachers.

This factor is decisive, especially because historically a greater valuation of the teaching profession has been claimed, that is, if the State and society do not value the importance of the teaching task, it is difficult for the teachers themselves to recognize the importance of their work.

Through the application of the research instruments, critical thinking has also emerged as a relevant topic for freedom of expression. These results contradict what is stated by Bezanilla-Albisua, Poblete-Ruiz, Fernández-Nogueira, Arranz-Turnes, and Campo-Carrasco (2018), who affirm that educating in critical thinking is a transformative action necessary for a social commitment, both inside and outside the classroom.

Initially, the interviewed university teachers state that critical thinking provides the basic skill to foster freedom of expression in trainee teachers. Who will be responsible for developing this same skill in school students. These trainee teachers have also declared through the focus group and interviews that having critical thinking will provide students with better opportunities to defend and better express their freedom of expression.

In interviews with university teachers, they have also indicated that from the perspective of critical thinking, the teaching of social sciences can be approached from controversial topics. As Jusino (2003) proposes, critical thinking promotes the development of the human being and their consequent liberation, however, this is contradicted by what the trainee teachers point out through the focus group and interviews, who say that although critical thinking is fundamental and necessary, it will not always be developed due to the limitations that the social science teacher may encounter in schools.

Although the curriculum considers critical thinking as a cross-cutting axis, due to the amount of content and the short time to review it in the classroom, the development of this skill cannot be assured. Moreover, despite the curriculum having advanced in considering skills, there is still an excessive valuation of the conceptual. This is reflected in the importance that public policies and educational establishments give to the results of standardized tests, such as Simce (Quality Education Agency, 2023). Evaluation where clearly the contents continue to take precedence, despite the inclusion of skill development.

On the other hand, trainee teachers through the focus group acknowledge the importance of critical thinking when approaching education to be able to read and interpret digital media, meaning without critical capacity, students will not be able to cope in a globalized world with such an abundance of information. They also understand that the University has been a fundamental instance in not only promoting critical thinking but also freedom of expression, as declared by the future teachers in training in their biographical narrative.

Jusino (2003) states that developing critical thinking skills involves a complex metacognitive process. This contradicts what is declared by the trainee teachers through the biographical narrative, who, according to their own school experience, saw not only their free expression curtailed but also did not witness teaching that sought to develop their critical thinking.

## Final considerations

The present research has been conducted with the aim of contributing to the study of the didactics of social sciences. Mainly from the perspective of the social representations of trainee social science teachers. Considering the multiple studies regarding Human Rights, on this occasion, it has been decided to propose freedom of expression as the central axis of this study.

Freedom of expression linked to the educational field is a complex area of study to address, but very necessary in our social context. Especially considering that, generally, research on free expression is related to the legislative or journalistic field. However, our purpose was to carry out a case study, where we have been able to delve deeper into the social representations of trainee teachers, not only from their teaching role but also from their perspective as citizens.

In relation to the specific and most relevant contributions of this research, they have been identifying and interpreting the personal, social, and pedagogical perspectives of trainee teachers on freedom of expression,

as well as their representations of the function and responsibility of what happens in the media, social networks, society, school, and the classroom. It has also been interesting to learn how social science teachers are being trained, with the aim of contributing to the constant improvement of their training process.

The conclusions point out the deficits in teacher training, as well as the need for improvement, especially considering that in the case studied we found the existence of training spaces that would contribute to the preparation of participants, both from the point of view of developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop as citizens, as well as to learn to promote educational experiences that allow their students to develop critical thinking and literacy, in order to contribute to participation in a democratic context.

When investigating the social representations of trainee teachers, we find a landscape full of nuances when trying to interpret the origins of their representations. Thus, the school, family, and social context that these students have lived have strongly influenced the generation of their perspectives, with the school space playing a rather marginal role, and often straining anti-democratic practices or questioning a real exercise of human rights. Nevertheless, they consider that education can do much more in this aspect, which allows them to propose innovations and changes at both the school and university levels.

Finally, we must point out that freedom of expression is a fundamental aspect of education for citizenship and that, in this sense, we must begin by training our teachers in these democratic values.

Regarding our goal of identifying the social representations of trainee Social Sciences teachers about freedom of expression, we can conclude that the various instruments applied have allowed us to identify that the social representations of trainee teachers about freedom of expression are related to the recognition of its characteristic as a constitutional right. In addition to mentioning that it must be exercised with respect and without fostering hate speech.

The application of interviews and focus groups has allowed us to delve deeper into their representations. The assumption is that in the social representations held by trainee teachers, freedom of expression is a constitutional right and, as such, they can express their opinion in instances of personal or academic dialogue. Trainee social science teachers have recognized freedom of expression as a right that can be freely exercised, both socially and academically. It has also been interesting to identify that at a personal level, positive experiences regarding freedom of expression have been presented mainly in their university stage, as opposed to those experienced in schools and families, where they consider that, due to age, their opinion has not been valued or has been outright vetoed. In relation to the school and the teaching of social sciences, although trainee teachers value freedom of expression as a controversial and necessary issue, they recognize that its treatment in the classroom must be accompanied by a commitment from the entire educational community, so that effective free expression can be exercised.

Regarding the predisposition of trainee teachers towards information from the media and/or social networks, the assumption focuses on trainee teachers recognizing that the media can have political influences and, therefore, may not be objective in the delivery of information. As for social networks, they consider them a space where there is more freedom to express their opinion. Trainee students recognize that the media may be influenced by certain ideologies and, therefore, may not be objective in the information they offer and as for social networks, they consider it a space where there is more freedom to express opinion and more plurality, although manipulations also abound, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them.

Another goal of our research was to evaluate whether trainee teachers are capable of interpreting information on social issues from freedom of expression criteria, we can conclude that trainee teachers have recognized that freedom of expression is a controversial issue, from which social problems can be worked on. The predisposition of trainee teachers to the information that circulates in social networks and in the media, in general, has given us guiding results for the research. Mainly because they position themselves critically.

The information obtained through the dossier of activities has made it clear that one cannot always trust the information provided by the media and/or that which circulates on social networks. The main reason lies in the fact that the media may be intervened by the interests of those who dominate them and, as for social networks, anyone can make a comment without foundation. In the focus group, they have been even more critical, pointing out that television and newspapers mainly promote populist news, rather than an interest in getting closer to the truth. In this sense, the focus group has proven to be a more incisive qualitative research instrument to delve into the representations of the participants.

Therefore, regarding the abilities of students for the critical interpretation of information based on freedom of expression criteria, the trainee teachers have shown themselves to be critical, and while recognizing the importance of digital media and social networks, they point out that it is important to reflect



carefully before making any comments. However, when they had to contrast their valuation about the media and social networks, they highlighted using and trusting (to a certain degree) more in social networks, as they have felt that in that space they have had greater freedom of expression.

Considering the development of the present investigation, potential issues for future research have emerged. In the first instance, and based on the results obtained, a more in-depth study regarding the limits of freedom of expression would be proposed. It is essential that trainee teachers have total clarity and, above all, an understanding of what the limits of freedom of expression are within the horizon of Human Rights.

Social science teachers must be aware of the importance of fostering the teaching of social sciences based on democratic values, social justice, and Human Rights (Carr, 2008). Education for democratic citizenship must be one of the educational purposes not only of social science teachers but also of the State, in public policies and in all educational institutions. A response to the current crisis of democracies cannot be less democracy, but more democracy, or a radical democracy, where freedom of expression serves to understand the importance of pluralism and of controversy and conflict as essential elements of democracy (Mouffe, 1999; Laclau, 2007; Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Sant, 2021).

There could also be a deeper exploration into the pedagogical practices of trainee teachers, with the aim of observing, describing, and interpreting their methodological proposals, and how these are articulated with their representations about freedom of expression and the approach to hate speech. Such actions could lead to concrete proposals to promote the improvement of the training process of social science teachers.

Knowing and evaluating the actions of trainee teachers, in the context of their educational practices, will allow for actions that can improve their abilities for the teaching of social sciences, not only from the delivery of content and generation of basic skills but rather, it should aim for school students to form their critical thinking and to be active and participatory individuals in their communities as part of the citizenry. Regarding new questions that have arisen in the development of the present investigation, the following can be mentioned:

a) Why do trainee teachers not have clarity regarding the limits of freedom of expression?; b) When working with freedom of expression as a controversial topic in the classroom: do trainee teachers maintain consistency between what they have declared in the planning, methodologies, resources, and the actions carried out in the classroom?; c) Are trainee teachers able to reflect on their practice after carrying out their educational proposal in the classroom on Human Rights?

More questions and challenges for the teaching of social sciences and for Education for Citizenship arise, which calls for more research in this line. We have discovered that freedom of expression must be treated in the initial training of social science teachers as a socially alive issue (Santisteban-Fernández, 2019; Gómez-Saldivia, 2020), to favor a citizen formation that dissipates the shadows that populisms cast against democracy.

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