

Health and Illness in Teaching Work

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Summary: Reflections on the experience of the professional work of teachers in Argentina, within a union framework. Characteristics of the current situation of teaching work in Latin America, with specific reference to psychological risk and teacher burnout.

Key words: teaching work-suffering-teacher burnout-desire-psychological risk-pupil-students-authorities-value.

WORK ON TRIAL

How do I avoid going crazy at school?

Let us interrogate work, turning subject into protagonist.

We are on a political battlefield. Suffering is at the centre of the everyday life of a teacher. For almost a century, we have been asking why we have to work within an administrative structure that is removed from the school, our natural environment. Norms and rules that order our time and movement are conceived from a place that is oriented towards neither education nor teaching.

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We say that the topic is political because it has to do with the exercise of bureaucratic power, far from everyday life: classroom-students-games-learning. Power accumulated in offices, documents, desks and government meetings.

Conceived and carried out from “above and far away,”-determining schedules, programs, and results for others, not for us, the teachers, students, families, communities .

But we carry out a job, real and concrete work for which we receive a salary. It has value, it's the only thing that specifically links what we do with what is ordered from above.

Ah...value...how valuable is what we do! Where it is measured? In the students? In the grades? In the graduates? Yes. But ... outside of ourselves as protagonists.

What do we do? We learn, we change relations: life and people, life and work, current and future ... but nothing counts it has no value. Ours is a genuinely untransmittable knowledge, remaining in the collective consciousness. The educational system waits for grades—averages—attendance records—certificates.

An authority of the system says: that is “very subjective.”

Thus, subjects don't count. What we carry out is for others, not for us.

Teacher Burnout

That “introduction” is a synthesis of my more than 50 years of experience as a labour psychologist, spent in various countries, schools, teachers’ unions, struggles and protests.

I have listened attentively to the suffering of teachers whom I've known from training courses, at job actions and strikes and on research projects carried out to discover, identify and serve. “Teacher burnout” today has me alert to developments that—always from outside of

the schools—impose pre-decided changes, from an entity distant from the everyday life of the teacher, a sector with authority over them that influences their life and worth. to improve results or to carry out “policies of results” for the marketplace ... different from what we produce today.

The issue of teacher burnout reminds me of research into occupational health in the 1970s in various countries in Europe and the United States. We were surprised by the unexpected results on the reasons for teachers’ sick leave - the largest percentage was for psychiatric reasons! A Spanish investigator, Jose Manuel Esteve (3), paid attention to these results and investigated the teaching profession and those who undertake it. He found a suffering hidden from social life and from the very individual who experienced it.

Obviously teachers with that problem had recourse to psychiatric attention and the health statistics detected them. Many years passed and one could confirm that that burnout had no cure in those spaces It is not a classic illness. The symptoms for which the teachers sought psychiatric help (insomnia, anguish, mental fatigue and memory loss) originate in a failure of the way work is organized, from outside the individual and a strong expectation of results on the part of bureaucratic organizations that bring about sanctions and negative assessments—often arbitrary and based more on policies or demands of the day than any objective evaluation--of teachers who don't fulfil what a government expects in order to deliver a policy “on time and correctly.”

Change (to relieve the problem of burnout) must take place in the critical sphere of regulations, sanctions, norms and working conditions, not with sleeping pills. The work of a teacher is carried out in a collective fashion with teachers and colleagues. It is not a solitary activity valued only by oneself. Over time, evaluations were shaped pedagogically to have an emphasis more on collective effort. However, the authoritarian and nega-

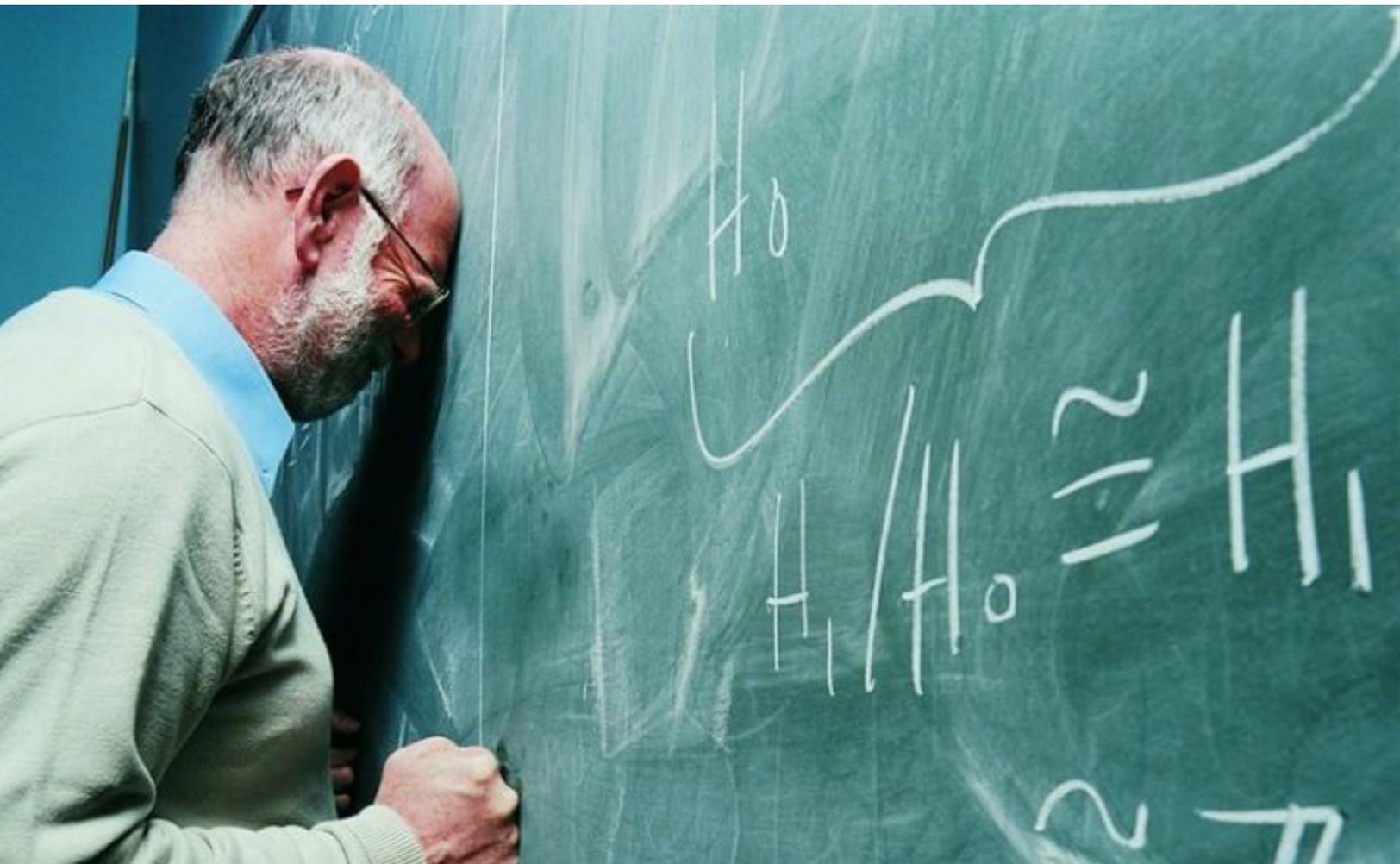
tive increase in neoliberal political and administrative policies demands business-oriented results adjusted to the individual from a cost-benefit factor, with threats of sanctions regarding salary and work stability.

In Brazil teacher burnout has been called “desistencia” (withdrawal). Teachers stop hoping for results. They no longer have any desire to produce, to create, to hope for something from what they create in school. They suffer in silence, continuing on with their routine and the need for a salary to live on. Nothing excites them, they value nothing as their own. Desidia invades them. This research project (the largest in the world—52,000 teachers in 1997-8 [1]) “discovered” that the central factor in teaching work is affection (*cariño*) between teacher and student. The core is emotional. Teachers feel “burned out”, like a motor, with no energy left to love another.

New categories of analysis.

We are currently developing research on “workplace risks in schools” (2). A key topic in labour studies accidents and work-related sickness. The category of risk was not easy to deal with, especially because the psychological aspect, for us as researchers, was central. The physical and environmental risks shared specific aspects with other workplaces -public buildings, furniture, bathrooms, patios, classrooms, etc. They had no secrets to keep. However, the form and content of teaching work were different and little studied in their specificity of personal-group relations with students and colleagues, those in authority. Thus we come to the definition of psychological risk in teaching work. Similarly, the category of suffering needed more exploration. The Argentinean teacher’s union (CTERA)¹ facilitated access to interviews, observations and discussions with individuals exposed to psychological risk and ready to identify it in themselves and in others. The link to work was the basis of analysis:

¹ Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic.



work with others, of equal standing or those in authority, with students, parents, neighbours and workers in the school setting.

Among various areas of analysis, we identified harassment as a central psychological risk for teachers, whether as victim or perpetrator, between colleagues and/or superiors. It is difficult to analyze, isolate in context and resolve collectively. (This is an area worthy of further research.)

The next risk, in order of importance or prevalence, is that which derives from the civil liability of working teachers when dealing with minors. Parents' jealousy regarding the conduct of the teacher caring for their child in their absence is as old as the profession and is one of the risks of this work. In the case of any accident or accusation of mistreatment, "the teacher is innocent until proven guilty," although this attitude seldom prevails. Prejudice is the risk in this case.

The collective character of teaching work

It is essential to consider that this work is done by individuals acting together. The work process is collective. The student-teacher relationship, like the doctor-patient relationship, is an important part of work, both in education and in health. On the other hand, education is a collective field, where the interactions of teachers-students-community are essential in evaluating socio-educational processes in the cultural history of peoples.

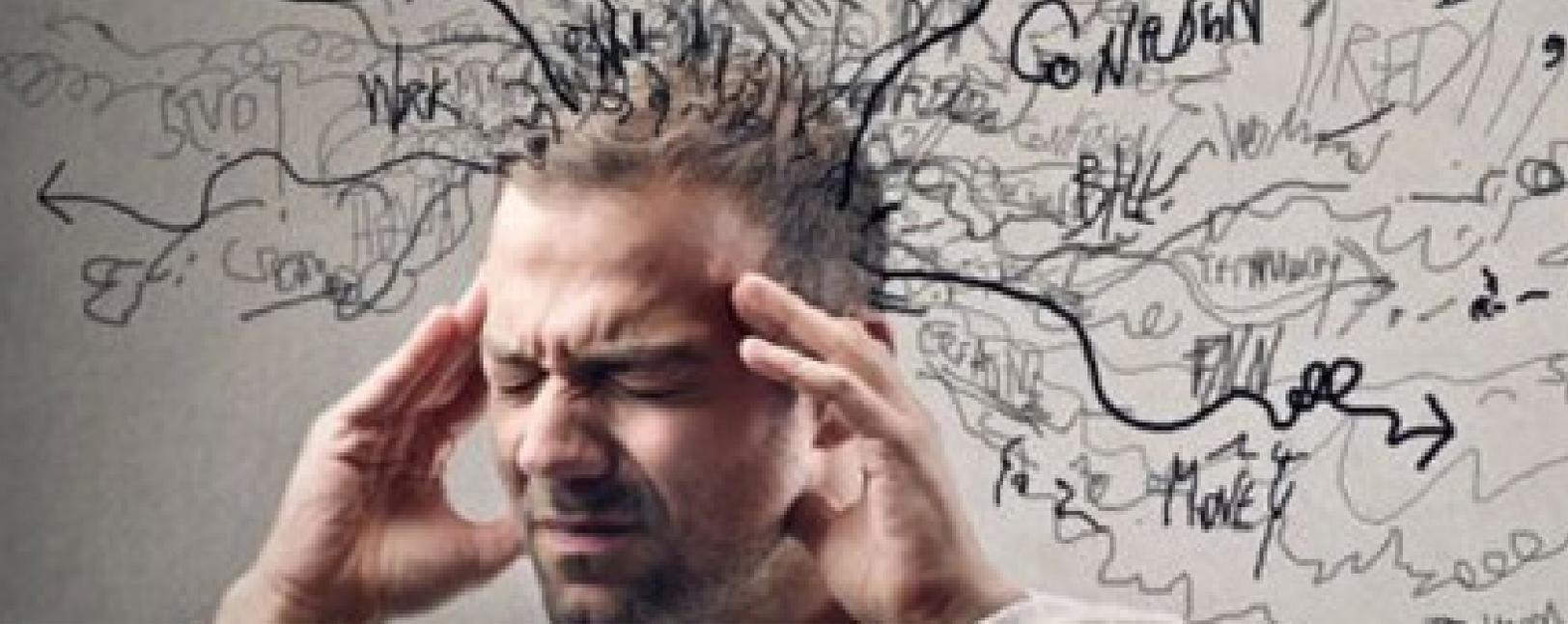
The political protagonism of students is increasingly important and visible. In Chile the student "penguins" (as they are called because of their school uniforms) demanded free, public and democratic education in the years 2005/2006 and took to the streets of Santiago, Concepción and Valparaíso before the demonstrations by secondary and university teachers which soon followed. The "disappeared" students of Ayotzinapa are proud representatives of the historic and heroic *Normales Rurales* (rural teachers' colleges) in Mexico. We cannot think of teaching work without those students

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and education workers who have advanced the struggle with a decisiveness and courage that has surprised the world (which had already been surprised in May 1968 by the Paris rebellion against authority).

Of course we speak out in agreement with student movements. And what of the teachers' strikes! This is a labour right that we exercise with all our force and with intense internal discussion in the workers' collectives. It is not easy to overcome the archaic resistance to disrupting "public service" that still lives on in teachers. The identity of "worker" is not totally constructed yet. There is still an idealized "teacher" without time or needs.

The issue of salary tends to take precedence over working conditions and the necessary participation of teachers in educational decisions and in the political direction of



a country and its culture.

Today we are going through long struggles and collective efforts along with peoples and their demandsMexico, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil They have histories of difficult strikes and little negotiation with government. The debate over the value of teacher's work is still unresolved. Within what parameters is there adjustment? Cost of living and work time for the employers, we never work enough ... time is compared to factory shifts and commercial or bureaucratic workdays. The content of the collective work of teaching and learning—as a product—is never on the desks of public administrators.

Conclusion.

In recent years, with the advance of a savage form of capitalism, the demand for results from commercial and financial projects with no pedagogical justification has intensified.

We have “human capital” in our hands... and it seems that we won't give it the destiny expected in global finance not even the country counts. This is not so. Especially because of the critical autonomy which young people have developed. A good number of students are ready to defend their destinies in life. The labour market is a reality that they are aware of and which they are prepared to confront.

Today (Sept.18, 2017) in Buenos Aires more than 30

secondary schools are occupied by students—for 15 days now—in protest against a unilateral reform—in part tied to their work futures—that the Ministry of Education seeks to impose.²

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2. This article by Dr. Deolidia Martínez was written in the last quarter of 2017.