



THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES ON THE HEALTH OF TEACHERS

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Summary: The implementation of neoliberal policies in education, as an alleged alternative to improve the quality of education, has instead deepened the crisis. The privatizing policies and the lessened participation of the State have transformed public education into a commodity to trade and thus, the role of teachers in the social development of our country has been devalued. Public education is being measured and assessed under strictly commercial criteria, which leads to a transformation of the school and labor arenas, and gravely impacts the health of teachers.

Key words: Neoliberal education policies, teachers' health, assessment, unions, legal standards.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right that the State is obliged to guarantee for all Peruvians, where teachers (a) constitute the most important subject in the change and improvement of its "quality". Thus, the State is bound to their professional development and to providing them with favorable working conditions

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for their performance in the classroom. That in turn will determine the quality of the students' learning. The participation of teachers is a necessary condition for "quality" to the extent in which, in its name, we are valid spokespeople of citizens, since there is a social acknowledgement of the individual and collective voices.

Peruvian Legislation

Education General Law 28044 and its Bylaws 011-2012, article 121, state that "because of the nature of its role, teachers ought to count with professional appropriateness, moral solvency, and mental/emotional health to carry out their duties..."

Peruvian Magisterial Law 29944, article 40, and letter D, includes as one of their obligations: "teachers shall subject themselves to medical and psychological evaluations when the authorities so demand it, according to the procedures of the ordinance". In other words, it highlights the relevance of health, something that is not duly translated in their rights.

The health of teachers is an important factor, since if they are ill, they will not be able to perform adequately. This is particularly true if health detriments are caused by their working conditions, or if professors are not regarded as human beings but as pieces of a gearbox in a machine.

The definition of occupational illness by the World Health Organization (WHO) is the following: "job-related diseases, disorders that in spite of not having originated exclusively from work, they are influenced by labor conditions in an important way..."

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines working conditions as: "a set of variables that define the execution of a task, the environment in which it will be performed, and its influence on the worker, be it physical, mental and social..."

The application of neoliberal policies

During the last few decades, Peru has been pursuing neoliberal education policies that have not improved the quality of education but on the contrary, have



thrown education in the middle of a crisis. Education has become a lucrative business. We have one of the lowest public budgets for education in Latin America, where teachers receive starvation wages, not at all in accordance to the professional service they render. Their assessment has become a political instrument to disparage the profession, the guild and SUTEP, but it is not meant to improve the quality of education (ECE and PISA assessments).

The Students Census Assessment (ECE for its acronym in Spanish) is given to second and fourth grade students yearly, as well as at a secondary level (second year as of recently) to promote not collective work; but rather the individualization of a teacher's job. It is meant to validate or discredit teachers in charge of a class, socially and professionally. But the assessment has lost all objectivity, since the government uses it to hand out bonuses (economic incentives) to the teachers of the classrooms that rank first and thus, it has transformed schools into a competition stadium, turning teachers against teachers, students against students and schools against schools. In the frenzy to get the first place bonus, the integrity of different areas is put aside, since the sole focus is to pay attention to what will be assessed; not to mention the tense working environment it has created. Performance assessment has to do with job permanence, and the fact that it is compulsory creates a state of permanent emotional destabilization amongst teachers. The

assessment is overly focused on evaluating theoretical knowledge and basic curricular skills, but it leaves out the essence of all pedagogical strategies: hard work and effort. Even though that would be difficult to measure, it is essential for the core of teaching.

Educational programs such as *Pela*, *Semáforo*, *SISEVE*, *Soporte Pedagógico*, etc. follow a harassing and/or punitive approach. They are implemented with a results-based budgeting, focusing on throughput and preparation for standardized test; but they let other key factors go unsolved: nutrition, high poverty rates, and social/family disintegration and their effects in the integral shaping of students and teachers in the public school environment. To make things worse, the school curriculum does not respond to the change needs of our country, but rather it deepens and replicates de lagging and dependency models.

Labor conditions and health

It is not uncommon to go to any school and find teachers speaking about how work has become a permanent martyrdom, that the paperwork to file is enormous and that the workload/intensity of the job forces them to take part of it home after classes, that there are no more breaks (between classes, recesses, union meetings), that the supervision feels biased as a threat to labor stability, that students are uncontrollable in the name of their rights and with unacceptable behaviors, that parents are constantly interfering with their role, etc. For all of the previously mentioned reasons, the work environment is tense, teachers are burnt-out and emotionally exhausted, and absenteeism is on the rise (permissions, unpaid leaves, leaves of absence due to diseases and others). Likewise, professors express having to take on bank credits to pay for their basic needs; and that the low wages demoralize them and force them to have a second or third job.

Those are the conditions faced in the classroom, a situation that is causing a severe damage not only on their physical health but emotionally, since there is also a high prevalence of mental disorders. Therefore, it is paramount to become aware of the real status of

their health, from our union and political standpoints. In order to achieve an effective understanding, it is necessary to do research to get to know the diverse characteristics of what working conditions are like, including educational policies. Peru is a country of vast territorial and cultural differences, since we have shorelines, mountain ranges and jungles that are markedly different from one another in terms of economic development, public health, etc.

For this reason, the union has started a research project called “The Impact of Neoliberal Educational Policies on the Health of Teachers.” Based on that, we will be able to have an objective diagnosis after more than 25 years of their implementation. It will also enable us to create and put forward a proposal for a Program of Prevention and Health Care. The State will be forced to compensate for the health damages, caused by the deleterious policies, by appealing to what national and international labor standards establish as necessities that are ignored and neglected in Peru.

Conclusions

The application of neoliberal policies in education as an alternative to improve the quality of education did not achieve the alleged aim, but rather it has deepened the crisis. Privatizing policies and the withdrawal of the State have transformed public education into yet another market commodity, devaluing the role of a teacher in our country’s social development. Public education is being measured and assessed under solely commercial criteria, the assessments are being used as political instruments to slander educators and unions; and weaken the labor stability that had been achieved after years of union fight by the *Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores de la Educación del Perú (SUTEP)* to grant the rights of teachers in public schools.

It is also worth remembering that our union is not only fighting for better wages, which is important, but it is also placing the health of teachers center stage; especially now since due to neoliberal policies, teachers have been seriously damaged. It is our responsibility as a guild to discuss and put the spotlight on this issue and come

up with a proposal of a Teachers Health Program of Prevention and Care, since health is another inalienable and fundamental human right.

It is imperative: To promote and work on a proposal of alternative educational policies vis a vis the neoliberal proposal, to work on a program of health prevention and care for teachers, to revise programs PELA, accompaniment, pedagogical support and others; and to say no to pedagogical and labor harassment, as well as to include a compensation and immediate health care platform to the fight of teachers.

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