

POLITICAL ASPECTS THAT AFFECT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' WORK

Vanessa Aparecida Diniz Parreira¹; Maristela de Souza Pereira¹

ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of qualitative empirical research that investigated the political aspects which permeate the experiences and practices of Elementary School teachers, considering the context of neoliberal rationality. It is based on theoretical perspectives that consider neoliberalism as a mode of production of the objective world, but fundamentally as a producer of subjectivities, and on the Paulo Freire's contributions, in order to reflect about the possibilities of social transformation and its intrinsic relations with the educational process. As main results, it points out that neoliberal rationality materializes in the daily school routine through educational policies, curriculum proposals and standardized assessments, impacting teaching concepts and practices and also on the professionals' precariousness of work, overload and illness, aspects have been exacerbated by the pandemic and for which their actions to confront them are incipient.

Keywords: neoliberalism and education; elementary education; teaching work

Aspectos políticos que inciden sobre la labor de profesores de la enseñanza básica

RESUMEN

En el artículo se presenta resultados de investigación empírica cualitativa que investigó los aspectos políticos que atraviesan las vivencias y prácticas de profesores de la enseñanza básica, considerándose el contexto de la racionalidad neoliberal. Parte de perspectivas teóricas que consideran el neoliberalismo como modo de producción del mundo objetivo, pero fundamentalmente como productor de subjetividades, y de las contribuciones de Paulo Freire, para pensar las posibilidades de transformación social y sus relaciones intrínsecas con el proceso educacional. Como resultados principales, se apunta que la racionalidad neoliberal se materializa en el cotidiano escolar por intermedio de las políticas educacionales, propuestas de currículos y evaluaciones estandarizadas, repercutiendo en las concepciones y prácticas docentes y también sobre la precarización del trabajo, sobrecarga y enfermedad de esos profesionales, aspectos potencializados por la pandemia y para los cuales sus acciones de enfrentamiento se muestran incipientes.

Palabras clave: neoliberalismo y educación; enseñanza de primer grado; trabajo docente

Aspectos políticos que incidem sobre o trabalho de professores do ensino fundamental

RESUMO

O artigo apresenta resultados de pesquisa empírica qualitativa que investigou os aspectos políticos que atravessam as vivências e práticas de professores do Ensino Fundamental, considerando o contexto da racionalidade neoliberal. Parte de perspectivas teóricas que consideram o neoliberalismo como modo de produção do mundo objetivo, mas fundamentalmente como produtor de subjetividades, e das contribuições de Paulo Freire, para pensarmos as possibilidades de transformação social e suas relações intrínsecas com o processo educacional. Como resultados principais, aponta que a racionalidade neoliberal se materializa no cotidiano escolar através das políticas educacionais, propostas de currículos e avaliações padronizadas, repercutindo nas concepções e práticas docentes e também sobre a precarização do trabalho, sobrecarga e adoecimento desses profissionais, aspectos potencializados pela pandemia e para os quais suas ações de enfrentamento se mostram incipientes.

Palavras-chave: neoliberalismo e educação; ensino fundamental; trabalho docente

¹ Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, Uberlândia, MG, Brazil; vanessadinizp@hotmail.com, maristela.ufu@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Thinking and discussing Brazilian Basic Education and teaching work raises the need to look more closely at what permeates the experiences, practices and understandings of the subjects involved in this process. We start from the understanding that broader social problems produce important effects in the educational sphere, an understanding anchored in the proposals of Dardot and Laval (2016), who discuss neoliberalism and its effects, which permeate – objectively, subjectively and collectively – all spheres of life, including education. From this perspective, neoliberalism is not just an ideology, economic policy or the current moment of capitalism, but rather a rationality that governs everything and everyone, guides the various spheres of human existence, constitutes and (re)organizes ways of living and relating to each other, producing subjectivities that are in accordance with neoliberal ideals (Dardot & Laval, 2016). Therefore, the organization of work, the educational system and the formulation of public education policies are deeply affected by neoliberal rationality.

In view of this scenario, it is necessary to understand the effects of neoliberal rationality in the field of education, more specifically, the effects about those who deal with such issues on a daily basis – the teachers. In order to map the state of the art on this topic, a literature review was carried out, using the descriptors used in this work, and recent articles were identified that discuss the relation between neoliberalism and the educational system, which highlight the commodification of education and denounce that, under neoliberalism, education is shaped to prioritize profits over critical training (Baptista & Colares, 2022; Santos et al., 2024).

In addition, research was found that articulates education and neoliberalism, considering the intersections promoted by the COVID-19 Pandemic (Costa, 2020; Cruz & Venturini, 2020; Melim & Moraes, 2021; Pereira, 2021; Previtali & Fagiani, 2022), which discusses teaching work in the pandemic context, forms of flexibility in remote work, the precariousness of teachers' work, and the implementation of remote teaching as a capital project to disqualify teachers. In general, the research cited is of a bibliographic and theoretical nature, and used reports and data from IBGE for its preparation.

In view of the above, this manuscript presents the results of an empirical research, carried out at the Master's level, which aimed to investigate the political aspects that permeate the experiences and practices of Elementary School teachers, considering the context of neoliberal rationality. The specific objectives of this study were to analyze the impact of this mode of production on the organization of teaching work, which was deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to reflect on the ways teachers deal with the problems identified.

It is important to highlight what we call political aspects: in addition to considering the aspects of neoli-

beral subjectivation, they also involve the analysis of the relations established in the school context, the external definition of norms and procedures that must be reproduced there, and also the impacts that the organization of the work of these professionals has on them.

The theoretical framework is based on the reflections of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval about neoliberal rationality and on the contributions of Paulo Freire to think about the educational process. The articulation between the ideas of these authors and the empirical materials was inspired by the Social Psychology of Work, a field that focuses on work, in its objective and subjective dimensions, and seeks to understand it based on the experiences of workers, being committed to revealing and transforming relations of inequality and oppression (Pereira, 2020).

The relevance of this study lies in the need to discuss the political, social, and economic processes that affect the educational system and the work of teachers. It focuses specifically on the scope of Basic Education, given that the publications that analyze the relations between neoliberalism and this phase of education are essentially theoretical studies, according to the literature review carried out by the authors (Parreira & Pereira, 2023). Furthermore, we understand that Psychology can play an important role in denouncing relationships of oppression and inequality and in the process of raising awareness, as proposed by Freire (1979), which is essential for the construction of new realities at the micro and macro levels.

METHOD

This is a qualitative study carried out in a public school in the interior of Minas Gerais, focusing on Elementary School II. This stage was chosen because it represents the transition from the initial phases to the end of the basic cycle, and is suggestive to find signs of neoliberal influence also in phases prior to High School and Higher Education, when it is more evident, as discussed in Parreira and Pereira (2020). It is configured as a case study, which does not aim at statistical generalization, but constitutes an opportunity to weave understandings about complex realities and assist in theoretical refinement (Stake, 2000).

The fieldwork took place between October 2019 and February 2020, when classes were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of location was due to prior knowledge between one of the authors and a teacher at the school, which facilitated contact with the management. There were 22 visits to the school, lasting an average of 2 hours each, in which the observation was carried out in the teachers' lounge, where it was possible to observe the exchanges that occurred there, the relations among teachers, and among these and the coordinators and students, and the way teachers related to their tasks and work in that space. This strategy made it possible to access elements of the material context in which interactions occur in the school space, in addition

to monitoring events and expressions in a contextualized manner (Sato & Souza, 2001).

Another resource used was writing a field diary, where reflections and aspects experienced during observations were recorded. The field diary is understood as a research tool that expands information and helps to think about experiences in the field beyond the mere recording of what was observed (Magnani, 1997).

Considering the developments of the empirical work and the pandemic, it was necessary to reorganize the methodological path and, to this end, semi-directed interviews were conducted remotely with five Elementary School II teachers, between December 2020 and January 2021, as a means of deepening the information previously obtained during visits to the school. The teachers interviewed were initially selected because they had had some exchange with the researcher during the field experience. From then on, the teachers interviewed themselves suggested other possible participants.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee (CAAE nº 19686819.8.0000.5152), authorized by the municipal Department of Education and by the school administration, and the anonymity of the school and the anonymity of the participants was protected, and prior consent was obtained.

The analysis of the material was carried out through an artisanal process of construction of meanings, based on the themes that emerged from the records (field diary and transcription of the interviews). In this process, the themes were articulated with each other, highlighting cores of meaning related to four main categories: 1) conceptions of education for teachers; 2) political aspects that permeate the context and school practices; 3) experiences of overload and illness related to the organization of work; and 4) coping tactics used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When analyzing the information from the field diary and the statements collected in the interviews, one element that emerged with intensity was the multiplicity of political aspects that permeate the daily lives of the teachers studied, in various dimensions. Thus, the researchers, who initially expected to discuss the marks of neoliberal rationality in teaching work, had to incorporate this broader view of the political dimension. To this end, we sought in Gramsci the conceptual operationalization of the phenomenon of politics, understood by this author as relations of force and power that are established and reproduced based on the division of society into classes, the unequal distribution of power and economic resources, as discussed in Schlesener (2009). The political dimension is unavoidable when trying to think about the effects of neoliberalism on any sphere of the social world (Dardot & Laval, 2016) and, when thinking about the school and educational sphere, we have to pay attention to the sometimes subtle ways in which such power relations and strategies of domination

are established. Thus, a first aspect that we highlight is related to the conceptions that the teachers who took part in the study present about the role of education.

1) Concepts of education

When asked about their views on the role of education, the statements sought to encompass aspects that go beyond the mere acquisition of content and that connect with social experience, as we can see in the following statements:

"Our role is to facilitate student learning and, within this framework, to work on citizenship. Being a teacher is not just about passing on content, it is about working with the needs of the student as a whole, in favor of humanity, even humanization, the sensitivity of others." Vera¹

"I work in the education of human beings, this involves countless aspects, so as a teacher, I think that my first objective is to try to work on mathematics in the best possible way, but today I see that my main objective is to educate human beings, and to educate them through mathematics." Eduardo

"I understand it as a formative function of society, in order to seek to develop critical thinking and autonomy, in relation to the social and personal environment and the search for knowledge for practical life, to favor the world of work, to favor awareness, the formation of opinion. The fact that the student is seeking this critical thinking, he is also, in parallel, qualifying himself, because of the demands of the job market that require education, knowledge. So for me the main function is not job training, it is the formation of critical awareness in the face of the reality that we live. The issue of work comes as a consequence." Irene

In general, the teachers interviewed understand education as a broad process, which involves human development, citizenship, autonomy, in addition to pointing out the importance of raising awareness among students. This understanding dialogues with ideas proposed by Freire (1979), for whom teaching is not limited to addressing objects or content superficially, but has to do with creating conditions in which critical learning is possible. For the educator, this critical learning requires the process of raising awareness among those who teach and those who learn (Freire, 2006), which involves taking ownership of reality in a critical way, knowing the relations of oppression that help to sustain the dominant structure. Furthermore, it involves assuming an active position for the transformation of relations of inequality.

However, when trying to show how they believe it is possible to stimulate critical thinking in their role as educators, other elements are added:

¹ Fictitious names.

"In my classes, I always try to focus on awakening this critical awareness, the awareness of what would bring fulfillment to each student, a dream that they have; so that they have the strength to persevere in what they want, to believe in their ability and to achieve what they desire. Not to be mere reproducers of what the world wants, right, which is only people who don't think. I teach them to be aware that it is not easy to go out there and achieve, you have to have perseverance, this issue of determination, to face obstacles because otherwise they are at the mercy of the job market, of life as it is. That is why critical thinking is so important, if you don't have vision and critical thinking, you won't get anywhere, you will continue to reproduce the vicious cycle of the job market. The capitalist ideology." Irene.

"I really enjoy working on entrepreneurship. Through one of my classes, a student even started to engage in the job market and managed, for example, to transform his family. I think they were more receptive, more open to seeking a way to improve their lives at school." Vera.

In her reports, teacher Irene mentions the role of education in helping students realize their dreams, while Vera mentions proposing entrepreneurship projects in order to encourage students to engage in the job market. It is noted that training for work and personal fulfillment is seen as synonymous with critical awareness and autonomy, without, however, considering that such training for work, equated with training for society, implies a form of adaptation/reproduction of the dominant structures that shape this society. What is pointed out as "criticality" is not in fact the awareness proposed by Freire, since for the educator, critical awareness implies understanding the aspects of reality that condition our experiences and transforming them.

We believe it is necessary to question the implications of favoring or preparing for the world of work in the context of neoliberalism. Laval (2019) discusses how the neoliberal school seeks to develop skills and adapt individuals to the conditions of the labor market. Being prepared for current demands ends up meaning being able to adapt to an increasingly precarious environment that demands that people have constant flexibility, competitiveness and productivity (Dardot & Laval, 2016).

There is an important contradiction in seeking not to reproduce the "vicious cycle of the labor market", as pointed out by Irene, and at the same time qualify students for this same market, especially when we understand that being qualified involves reproducing and subjecting them to conditions of oppression. In this sense, the discourse of transformation, although it denotes a desire of the teachers, does not necessarily match the practices mentioned and clashes with the concrete limitations related to producing a non-capitalist education within a capitalist scenario.

In addition, there seems to be a contradiction between the understanding of what critical awareness is and how to mobilize this in students. Irene, although referring to the "capitalist ideology", points to an idea of criticality linked to the search for achievement, perseverance, dreams and determination in the face of obstacles. This view is linked to the meritocratic ideology, which naturalizes inequality while leaving aside concrete, structural and political conditions in the understanding of the different realities experienced and the various intersections of class, race, gender, among others (Patto, 2000). In this sense, the practice of critical consciousness is not about breaking with current problems and transforming reality, but about a shift or rise in position, so that the student and the family can, individually, move from one previous condition to a better one.

Another aspect that stands out is the view that the solution is found at a personal level, and that it is up to each person, individually, to act to change their story. Freire (1979) points out that awareness is not a unilateral phenomenon and that it is not possible to eradicate relations of domination only at an individual level, and that the struggles for transformation must be carried out together with oppressed groups and classes (Freire, 2006), given that emancipation is a collective task.

2) Political aspects that affect the school reality

In this section we will address the elements that denote the political contours of the practices and relationships established in the school context. These elements were organized into two topics, which we present below.

a) Public education policies, standardization and regulation of education

A first way of approaching political issues with the educational context is expressed as follows:

"We are political beings, and education is being directly affected by politics, by social issues, so we can't pretend that it doesn't matter who is governing, the political issue doesn't matter." Eduardo.

"I think that these political and economic issues, mainly, compromise education a lot, they are very interconnected things, for example, depending on the manager who is in charge of education in any city, or in the country, if he demands public policies for education, education will be conducted in one way, if they are not very interested in public policies for education, then education proceeds in another way." Elena.

Here we can see the understanding that public policies are implemented based on the interests of those who propose them and that the actions or omissions of the governors produce concrete effects on the educational system. The influence and regulation of the

State in education, aiming to reproduce the current social order, can be better understood based on the critical conception of ideology defended by Thompson (2009), as a system of ideas and strategies that aims to establish and reproduce relations of domination. This symbolic ideology seeks to hide and justify such relations in order to preserve the unequal distribution of power. Neoliberalism works to preserve and reproduce dominant structures and forces this same logic into the educational system.

Another aspect mentioned by the participants was how political regulations “enter the school”:

“It enters in various ways, through the education system itself, when we think about textbooks. It enters with laws, it enters this framework that they have to standardize what is to be taught, it enters into various aspects that we let go unnoticed, formal and informal.” Irene.

The books, legislation and curriculum standardization are examples of the materialization of aspects of politics in the school context. Regarding standardization, conversations were witnessed during the fieldwork period among teachers regarding the content to be taught in each grade, with teachers questioning curricular guidelines, textbooks or complaining about the impossibility of covering all the content that was planned within a given period. In this sense, it is interesting to note that teachers do not remain static or indifferent when faced with this issue, this is noticeable through statements that demonstrate opinions regarding the policies of standardization and homogenization of content, especially with the *Base Nacional Curricular Comum (BNCC)*:

[About the *BNCC*] *“They are shaping education through documentation, guidelines, laws and standards, according to the way they want us to teach”.* Irene.

“This issue of aligning, making sure the content is the same for everyone, that doesn’t exist, the issue of choosing the textbook itself, it’s different and that’s why the teacher has to choose, because there are vaguer books, you need more, more in-depth research, and then you can’t, for example, have that in a school in the outskirts where the child doesn’t have a place to research. If the choice of textbook itself is specific to each school, how do you expect to equalize education?” Vera.

*“I believe that [the *BNCC*] will try to make the country move forward, secondly, there really are teachers who, for example, are new, sometimes they’re not up to date, it’s a way for you to go back and have a guide to follow, so I think it’s valid, as long as it’s not rigid, and it’s not, there’s openness to work, the teacher has autonomy, so I think it’s valid!”* Júlio.

For Vera, the attempt to align content ends up reinforcing the inequality that is present, while for Júlio, the *BNCC* is a guide for education to move forward in alignment and is a resource for new teachers, as long as there is autonomy among professionals.

Also regarding teachers’ opinions about standardization, during the fieldwork, two teachers talked about the need to follow what was set out in the *BNCC* when developing the planning pedagogical approach. One of them reported that “this year is easier, everything is already prepared, but it is necessary to adapt because the organization of the content in the way it is there will not always be the best”. Although she points out the need to adapt the organization of the content, the teacher’s speech does not seem to question the objectives behind the proposal or what effects are produced by basing teaching on a curriculum that is “prepared”. The focus here seems to be on the aspects that facilitate or hinder the work itself in everyday life. Girotto (2018), when discussing the standardization proposed by the *BNCC*, criticizes the one-dimensional proposals that “do not recognize educational inequality as a starting point to be problematized based on different actions” (p. 22),

Another aspect that draws attention regarding the *BNCC* is the way it was implemented, having generated debates and controversies since it began to be discussed. Souza (2010) denounces the hierarchical and undemocratic way in which educational policies are implemented, in addition to the lack of knowledge and clarity among educators regarding the purposes of the policies. The result is the risk of alienation from pedagogical work, which compromises the attribution of meaning to their work for educators.

Souza (2010) also reminds us that when analyzing educational policies, we must be aware of the interests and concepts behind what is proposed, from those involved in the formulation to the final document. In the case of the *BNCC*, what is proposed is a training that emphasizes the acquisition of skills and abilities, concerned with developing in students the ability to solve problems and flexibility, aspects very similar to business management (Laval, 2019). This functioning is consistent with the “new reason of the world” (Dardot & Laval, 2016), which shapes education and begins to demand knowledge and skills that are convenient to neoliberal logic.

The teachers also pointed out other elements linked to educational standardization: assessment systems and quantification of teaching. The search for uniformity is accompanied by the ideal imposed by comparison models and, to this end, large-scale assessments are used, which generate classification rankings and thus establish forms of control over the components of the educational system (Cury, 2017). Not only is curricular standardization accompanied by assessments, but it is also justified by them, since the content is organized based on what is considered important in the tests:

"The government pretends that education is of quality because it forces mass approval so that the scores go up. The State sends handouts for teachers to train, that's the word, to train the student for the external assessment tests, so the external assessment tests contain identical questions so that the student is conditioned to be able to answer those questions and not really learn how to think." Eduardo.

During the visits to the school, it was possible to witness the application of some external assessments, such as the *Prova Brasil*, one of the assessments that make up the *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica* (SAEB). On these occasions, it was common to notice tension and movements among teachers, in the sense of discussing the content that would probably be tested on the tests and what they had actually taught the students.

We understand that the use of assessments as an indicator of educational quality, measured through standardized assessments and indexes and rankings, is fictitious. It can also be argued that the interest of the State is not necessarily the quality of education, but the numerical results obtained, which demonstrates the quantification of education. Laval (2019) discusses this fetishization of numbers, which are used as a criterion for school quality, and debates the "cult of efficiency" that is imposed on education and that implies the construction of devices for measuring and comparing pedagogical results.

The "cult of efficiency" is completely tied to the subordination of schools to economic imperatives (Laval, 2019). According to Gatti (2009), the large-scale assessment movement was consolidated mainly due to the stimuli and pressure from international organizations, such as the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO. The guidelines and orientations of these organizations become reference parameters for countries that take out loans or accept guidelines from these organizations, which must then comply with a set of measures prescribed to them and that come to shape their educational policies and practices (Cury, 2017).

b) Broader political aspects that affect educational relations and processes

In this category, the information expressed by the participants about broader elements, linked to the social and political relations present in society, and which also have an effect on the school reality, was grouped. The first point concerns the understanding of the teachers facing the different economic realities of families, a topic widely discussed in the interviews, as illustrated in the following statements:

"Within the same city, we see completely different realities. The teacher who works, for example, in the outskirts, is different from the teacher who

works in central education, so if you ask the student to do research, look on the internet, we saw this a lot now [during the pandemic], teachers in the outskirts had a much lower return." Eduardo.

"Here, if I want to go on a trip to the museum, I can, [I] just say 'let's go to the museum on such and such a day, bring money and we'll rent the bus'. Not there in [the outlying neighborhood], we had to do a recycling project to raise the money to pay for the bus" Vera.

"Schools further out on the outskirts are barely getting any results [in remote learning]. In the other early childhood education school I work at, there's hardly any participation from parents, but out of 24, five students are doing it." Irene.

In general, teachers present a critical view of the socio-financial inequality of families, which is reflected in different school contexts. The statements cited denounce the social intersections in the daily school routine and allow us to understand that inequality was already present before, having been accentuated by the pandemic situation. Thus, it is possible to perceive the manifestation of a critical awareness of these teachers in relation to the class difference, expressed by the geographic location and social stratum of those who attend the school.

Another aspect highlighted was the lack of government resources and investments and the effects this has on public education:

"There are no efficient public policies in this country regarding education, which goes against our own constitution, which states that 25% of PIB should be invested in education, but the country does not even invest 7%." Eduardo.

"I think this economic issue is fundamental, it also has a big impact, because if public funds are not invested in these policies that are directed towards education [...] the result is different." Elena.

Patto (1992) discusses the interests behind the investments that are (not) made in education and denounces that the State is not serving the desires of all citizens, serving instead the purposes of capital and investing in education only to the extent that it demands. The author also points out that the interests of the dominated and the dominant are irreconcilable. In other words, what is proposed for education is subordinate to economic aspects, and public policies are developed in response to the demands of capital. In this sense, Dardot and Laval (2016) argue that neoliberalism, rather than representing a withdrawal of the State from economic decisions as many believe, is characterized by its intensive presence, aiming to ensure that the expectations of capital are met.

Another point that was present concerns politics in its partisan sense, linked to the polarization that

has been observed and intensified in recent years and, especially, in the 2018 presidential election. During the observations, as recorded in the field diary, and in some interviews, it was possible to note how the differences of opinion between supporters and critics of President Bolsonaro's statements and actions, found in relations in general and heated on social networks, were also present, affecting interpersonal relations within the school context and expressing interference within the classroom and in teaching. In this sense, the statements of the research participants about the *Escola Sem Partido Movement*, about the *Reforma da Previdência* and the *PEC* to freeze spending stand out, since all of these aspects affect their personal and professional reality.

"One example is this dialogue about non-partisan schools, right? In fact, there is a political party, but they try to cut political discussions, critical discussions." Júlio.

"There is a proposal that they want to cut some school topics so as not to work with students, that non-partisan school thing, precisely so that we don't have this interference to develop this critical thinking in students regarding politics. A thinking person is not an advantage in the world we live in, the more critical people there are, the more chance of revolt. Bolsonaro is an example of someone who doesn't think. The fact he is there shows that the majority of the Brazilian population has this mindset, which I'm telling you I have to fight to go against." Irene.

Such manifestations were more critical in the interviews, but occurred less intensely in the field observations and, most of the time, with isolated speeches and without the engagement of the others present, which showed discomfort, tensions in relationships and the possible fear of reprisals, consistent with the political moment in which the research was conducted.

3) Experiences of overload and illness intensified by the pandemic

From the observation stage at the school, it was possible to notice that overload is part of teachers' daily lives, especially at the end of the school year. It was not uncommon to hear reports of teachers who had to take schoolwork home, since their work hours were not enough to handle everything, in addition to health-related complaints, sometimes just a persistent headache, a cold, or even more serious issues, as in the case of a teacher with severe pain in her hands, preventing her from writing accurately. Another situation, which occurred at the end of the school year and which draws attention, is reported in the following excerpt:

In a conversation between the principal and the supervisor, the principal says that at the end of the year no one likes anyone anymore, that

everyone is irritated and stressed. She goes on to say that she herself is very stressed, that in this state everyone really fights. Still on the subject of the rush and stress at the end of the year, she says that she took a sedative, but it didn't work, so she took more to see if it would work (Field diary, November 29, 2019).

Work overload affects professionals in many ways, affecting work relationships, interactions with colleagues, and causing greater stress, irritation, anxiety, suffering, or even health problems. Patto (1992) discusses teacher overload and also points out other problems that are added to it, such as devaluation, low pay, and multiple work shifts, especially in the case of those who are mainly responsible for taking care of the home and family, the majority of whom are women.

This scenario, in which teachers were already tired and felt that they could not cope, were able to perform all tasks satisfactorily, it intensified even more after the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of remote teaching, as pointed out in the literature review, which brought new challenges to teaching work:

"Many people think that teachers stayed home resting, I'll be honest with you, I have a job, but it feels like I worked three shifts, I worked much more." Eduardo.

"WhatsApp service, email service, every day we go there and pick up boxes and more boxes, the teacher is correcting on average 400 activities, I was teaching 10 classes, and I earn enough for 5. And the salary never doubles." Vera.

"The working time we have is not even enough to correct things; we are working extra. There is no way to think about recording a video during working hours, because there is no time, only if I have to work overtime." Irene

"It was a strain that is unprecedented in my 34 years of work in education." Elena.

One of the main points mentioned was the significant increase in workload, with the feeling that they had to perform more tasks than before the pandemic. The working hours were not enough to meet all the new demands and teachers had to go beyond the allotted time. Another point mentioned by professionals was the challenges of working from home:

"It was very difficult for teachers. First, they had to work from home, so they had to spend money on internet, electricity, they had to make with their own technological equipment, computers, computers crashing, they had to find a space at home to be able to organize these virtual classes with those who could. They had to make with the board, organize presentations, they had to do all of that." Eduardo.

"The city government didn't offer the teacher anything, they had to organize their own desk, computer, internet, telephone, and electricity, so we worked with the possibilities we had at home." Elena.

The problems pointed out by teachers highlight the precariousness of teaching work in the pandemic scenario, with each teacher individually being responsible for dealing with the new demands, both in terms of structure and working conditions, as well as the challenges produced by remote teaching. As a result, the workday has been intensified and extended, requiring numerous adaptations and even greater subjective engagement on the part of these professionals. It is also worth noting that transforming the home into a work environment can highlight gender inequality and the sexual division of labor, since women are still more responsible for domestic activities and family care (Macêdo, 2020), as pointed out by Júlio:

"Women who have children at home and have to work with children, it is much worse. It is more difficult, working from home is more difficult, you mix family, mix everything at the same time, you lose some of the quality, yes." Júlio.

The pandemic has made it even more evident how many aspects of the educational process depend on the individual dedication and effort of each teacher, who has to "get by" as best they can. This aspect corresponds to the neoliberal demand for self-management which, according to Gaulejac (2007), represents the incorporation of managerial logic at the individual level, with workers being called upon to self-manage and each one having to function as a private company in terms of being flexible, autonomous and achieving the expected results on their own.

In addition to the experiences of pressure, overload and precariousness increased in remote teaching, some teachers reported illness resulting from work:

"We are feeling more back pain, headaches, emotional distress, we are crying more, and we see people complaining, because you bring up the subject and there are a lot of people who are like that. I went to the psychiatrist last week because I am feeling a lot of pain in my neck which I know is due to anxiety." Vera.

"This made me sick. I couldn't handle it, first because of the problems I had already acquired with my spine, due to the double, and then now, because I was very alone during the pandemic. I started to get depressed with all the pressure we were under. I had to see a psychiatrist, a psychologist, because I'm really going crazy! I went crazy because no one could handle it. I had to take medication because I couldn't sleep, I had anxiety attacks, so it was hard for me." Elena.

Along with the physical and emotional exhaustion and pain resulting from the adapted working conditions, they had to deal with the pandemic, the fear of getting sick and the social distancing, aspects that marked the lives of everyone who went through this experience. However, as a category, they were at the center of many controversies and demands, and this scenario brutally revealed the situations of precariousness, suffering and illness in the work that has long accompanied teaching work. It is worth noting that the capitalist mode of production promotes suffering and illness, and that precariousness is intrinsic to this. However, these aspects are enhanced in certain historical and social situations, as we have seen in the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This aspect highlights the historical-social nature of health-disease processes, as pointed out by Laurell and Noriega (1989), who denounce that the phenomenon of illness is not only individual nor restricted to the biological sphere, but is a result of productive relations and the social context and, therefore, a process that occurs at a collective level.

4) Tactics for coping with the problems highlighted

As discussed by Souza (2010), the maintenance of hierarchical practices in education leads to questions, dissatisfaction and also opens up opportunities for confrontation. In this sense, given the circumstances and the various problems presented in the previous sections, resulting from the neoliberal invasion of schools, teachers do not remain static; they seek daily actions to confront the situation as a whole, to transform, or at least circumvent, aspects of reality. For example, proposing assessment practices that are different from those that contribute to the reproduction of the system and investing in ongoing training as a means of enhancing their practice, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

"Nowadays, the process is 60%, the test is 40%, but there are teachers who are rigid in the process and turn it into a product as well. I try to get away from this, I try to work on various skills in the student, kinesthetic, auditory, visual, taking various types of different activities and trying to include the largest number of people possible. We break away from the conventional by doing this." Júlio.

"I am learning to work from the perspective of historical-cultural theory, and I am learning more and more along the way. I think that while we teach, we also learn, which is why this role is also dynamic and always changing, because since we learn from the student and the student learns from us, we also change." Eduardo.

Therefore, it is important to highlight the fact that both reports point to individual actions, which depend greatly on the interest and "effort" of each teacher. This aspect was also noted in the fieldwork:

The teacher talks about the lack of resources, but that she always finds a way to prepare fun materials to work with the students, because they love them and the reception she receives when she arrives in the classroom is very gratifying. I wonder how much the lack of resources and investments makes the teacher take on individual responsibility for preparing materials and creating alternatives for classes. If she didn't do it this way, and relied exclusively on the possibilities that exist within the school itself, would she be considered a good teacher? A dedicated teacher? (Field diary, October 9, 2019).

In the absence of collective solutions and expanded, sustained and interconnected public policies, individual effort appears as a resource for being a good teacher and for facing limitations. The logic of self-management², as proposed by Gaulejac (2007), prevails in the organization of school work and even confrontations are subject to the effort of each individual. Another possibility, still within individual resources, concerns the practices presented by Irene and Vera:

"There is something called hidden curriculum. That's what I do! It's in the legislation that you have to do it that way, I even comply with what is stated there, the objectives, the content, I have to comply, but the hidden curriculum is what the teacher does beyond what is in the documents, I work on that, but they don't know that I work on that." Irene.

"There were some things [in the BNCC] that we couldn't change, but we could add. For example, some topics that the teacher could work on if he or she felt it was necessary. The teacher has to have this freedom and this insight, the ability to make the most of it." Vera.

The statements presented draw attention to another point: how teachers seek to "get around" the structure by finding loopholes to have a certain autonomy in their work. We rely on Certeau's (1998) proposals to reflect on how teachers use tactics, from within the system, to overcome what is established. The author discusses the ability of subjects to find loopholes and develop "ingenuities", hidden practices to intervene in reality, to take up space, and reinvent everyday life.

However, even tactics, in the sense discussed by Certeau (1998), have a reduced transformative effect, since they are limited to skirting the contours established by the system itself. It is striking that there is no mention of collective actions to confront the issue or truly transformative practices that promote deeper fissures in what is established.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In general, it is concluded that political aspects are present in various ways in the experiences and practices of elementary school teachers, in a scenario in which neoliberal rationality is also reproduced in educational contexts. The main aspects are: 1) despite the understanding of education in its broad nature and presenting some critical view regarding political aspects that permeate the educational sphere, there are contradictions between discourse and practices, which sometimes reproduce aspects of the criticized reality; 2) neoliberal rationality and managerial ideology materialize in public educational policies with the proposal of standardized curricula and assessments, formulated based on private interests, with the purpose of developing skills and competencies in students; 3) precariousness, overload and excessive demands have produced experiences of suffering and illness among teachers, showing that neoliberal rationality also affects the organization of work at the micro level; 4) such problems have worsened in the context of the pandemic and remote teaching, since teachers have had to adapt individually to the new demands, without institutional or government support, generating feelings of loneliness and helplessness that, in turn, have resulted in higher levels of overload and suffering; 5) faced with this, teachers use tactics to get around the problems, most of them using individual strategies to deal with the issues highlighted, with no mention of collective and articulated ways of confronting neoliberal policies.

These findings reinforce the urgency of discussing these issues with all those who make up the school universe and creating spaces, actions and practices at the micro level, which also have effects at the macro level and are enabling social transformations. In line with the theoretical framework adopted, we understand that it is not possible to promote significant changes only in the school environment, without a reorientation of the social and productive process as a whole. The construction of a truly democratic, critical and emancipatory education can only be achieved if we also build a more just, equitable and truly democratic society, which is a collective project.

In view of the findings and the course of the research, we can perceive some limitations, especially with regard to seeking to analyze how all these elements discussed materialize within the classroom. In this sense, it would be interesting to conduct other studies that specifically focus on the teaching-learning context and allow for the daily practice of teachers to be encompassed. In addition, it is important that other school realities be addressed and that the role of all those involved in the educational process be considered. Thus, we call on psychologists to

contribute in their professional work for the process of awareness and emancipation, in all contexts, including work and education, because only then will other possibilities become feasible.

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Received: June 28, 2022

Approved: November 28, 2024

Section Editor

Maria Júlia Lemes

Data availability

The data cannot be made publicly available.

This paper was translated from Portuguese by Ana Maria Pereira Dionísio.