

Full Length Research

Exploring the reality in which members of the teaching profession are immersed in Argentina: A case study

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The concept of teachers' precarious working conditions refers to the pressures and adjustments suffered, during the last decades, in public schools in Argentina. The Neo-liberal project influenced all aspects of public and social life, such as health, education and working rights; deteriorated the conditions under which those sectors function; and destabilized labor structurally. The pressure exercised by international organizations, such as the IMF and the World Bank, affected Educational Policies, which considered the educational crisis to be, basically, one of efficiency and effectiveness in the system, as well as in the quality of the services and their administrator: the State. As a result of these policies, structural changes imposed new operational rules and orders not only on the labor sphere, but also on the curriculum. Those changes also reinforced the techno-bureaucratization of the system, blurred the pedagogical sphere and accentuated the social breach. This case study attempts at a critical analysis of the impact those changes had on the working conditions of teachers, particularly concentrating on issues related to teachers' health and pathologies connected to their tasks performance. Following a qualitative approach, interviews to the main characters involved were conducted in order to analyze the impact this problem had on their working performance. How did the idea of investigating teachers' discomfort arise? It arose from my own experience. I noticed that in certain places, such as teachers' room and school corridors, there were several unfair and troubling issues. Teachers' room is usually a place where a lot of discomfort takes place, where even students are often despised. Those things made me feel sick, I suffered from dysphonia, I easily caught colds, I was distressed and disappointed. I often wondered, what is wrong with us? Why do we get to this point? In order to become a teacher, one needs to have a strong sense of vocation. Some people think teaching is simply a profession, but I think it needs to be based on our love for others.

Key words: Teachers' job, educational policy, precarious working conditions, occupational health.

INTRODUCTION

Society is immersed in a profound crisis that affects every aspect of citizens' lives, even school, which functions as its social, political and cultural centre. As future teachers, some of the problems and realities that take place in the school everyday need to be analyzed and understood. The starting point should be the idea that a better understanding of the situation will provide the tools to become better professionals.

With regard to the topic of teachers' working conditions, for the sake of this study, we have decided to limit our

analysis to the issue of teachers' health and their pathologies in relation to the performance of their daily schooling tasks. We have undertaken to investigate the different teachers' roles that have lately emerged because they somehow reflect –at both educational and institutional levels- the changes that the same State has undergone. It is common to listen to people complain about school and teachers: What is wrong with teachers? Why are they absent to class? Why have strikes and leaves of absence increased? This apparent lack of responsibility has led to shape the objective of this work, although there may be several other factors that could better explain this situation.

As was stated before, for the purpose of this case

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study, the analysis has been somehow restricted. Considering teachers' working conditions, this work will specifically concentrate on teachers' health and pathologies related to the performance of their activities. Although this will neither be an exhaustive quantitative work, nor a clinical approach to the most frequent pathologies among teachers, it will try to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the reality in which professionals are immersed. The instruments used for data collection were semi-structured interviews. Ten interviews were held with local teachers from the Mar del Plata region, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Literature on teachers' precarious working conditions, educational policy and occupational health was consulted and used as the theoretical framework to guide the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical background

Throughout history, different policies have been applied to the education system and, particularly, to teachers. Since teachers' current situation is the result of those policies, this article will begin with a brief overview of the emergence and evolution of our educational system. During the late 19th, and early 20th century, education began to be the most important and extensive mechanism of social control that has ever been created by the Nation-State.

In that period, the State used the modern school model to make education fit within its boundaries. It was also used to make education become the State's most efficient tool, owing to its influence on people's everyday life. These changes generated a fast naturalization of the school - supported by its obligatory attendance, cost-free status and universality - within the social framework. School was not perceived as efficient because of its context, but because of its insides.

In its own essence, the school of modernity was able to incarnate the modern definition of education (Pineau, 2001: 30). In Argentina, primary and secondary schools were intended not only to form citizens, but also to create bureaucratic instruments capable of governing the nation. The children of the first immigrants saw, in the expanding State, the opportunity to join power spheres that had been previously forbidden to them as a result of their material conditions. Consequently, after having access to those spheres, they rapidly became part of the middle class.

However, the school was not able to integrate the whole social groups with the same intensity as it had done with immigrants. Some people who could not remain part of the school system - because of their material, cognitive or disciplinary conditions - were strongly expelled from it. Those who could afford a private education were able to obtain similar results as

those who were part of the public system, but those who could not pay for their education were excluded from the school system and from society as well.

Peronism¹ made several reforms that led their followers to confront teachers directly. The government limited the scope of the Law 1420 to the obligatory and cost-free status of education. However, the anti-secular and personal tendencies of State policies (Estatuto del Docente Argentino del General Peron de 1954 - Perón's Argentine teachers' by-laws of 1954) collided with the liberal tradition and formation of Argentine teachers. Several educational reforms were made following to the First Five-year Plan (Puiggrós, 1998: 100). The fundamental principles underlying the educational reforms that were part of the First Five-year Plan were established on the search for an educational philosophy that could balance materialism and idealism with the principles of democracy. Education was considered part of the national wealth, a social good, belonging to everyone in the country.

A practical, professional teaching was the aim, especially for secondary school education. Arizaga², the ideologist of reforms, back in the 40s tried to provide a solution to the pedagogical problems, to educate the spirit, to give instruction for labor, and to train the Man for the Nation. Furthermore, progress was made on the reform of the school structure, principally generating different types of secondary level education. The main idea was to direct this school level from normalismo³ to the technical training of workers.

The purpose of these school reforms was to eradicate a discriminatory practice that, according to Perón, had started from the beginnings of the school system designed by Mitre and Sarmiento. However, Arizaga's reforms were limited by the most reactionary faction of Peronism, which produced disputes between this political movement and the intellectuals, the progressive middle-class and a body of teachers and university students.

During the second half of the 20th century, educational policies in Argentina were influenced by the different conflicting political projects. As a consequence, it was impossible to design lasting pedagogical projects based on why and how to teach.

After Perón went into exile in 1955 and the Junta de Comandantes (the military council that seized power) allowed a general election, the intransigent Radical

¹ Peronism is an Argentine political movement based on the ideas and programs associated with former President Juan Perón and his second wife, Eva Perón. Peron's political movement (also known as *Justicialismo*), derived its name from the Spanish words for social justice (in Spanish, *justicia social*). The original ideology of Peronism was marked by some constants, including the regulation of the market, and the planning of the economy. It also incorporates elements of corporativism, nationalism and social democracy.

² Jorge Pedro Arizaga was the sub-secretary of the Ministry of Education during Perón's office. He introduced the reform of the schooling system in Argentina in 1947.

³ *Normalismo* refers to a specific type of schools that were in charge of training teachers in Argentina at that time. It was created towards the end of 20th century along with the first schooling system and it was liberal in its nature.

President, Arturo Frondizi, implemented the policy of Developmentalism. Since this policy was strongly influenced by Taylorism, Behaviourism, and Dewey's Pragmatism, education began to be seen as an investment. In this respect, Frondizi drew part of his policy of economic development from the Human Capital Theory (Karabel and Halsey, 1976: 22).

During this period, the emphasis was placed on the technical development of secondary school, the transfer and decentralization of national schools and the boost given to private schools. The tendencies of external organizations, such as the ECLAC, were closely followed. The administrative and financial reforms, as well as the changes in teachers' functions, were aimed at obtaining greater efficiency and higher levels of efficacy. The policy of Developmentalism reduced pedagogy to efficient purposes and the task of pedagogy to didactic teaching (Puiggrós, 1985: 18).

During Frondizi's government, the most important debate around education was whether it should be secular or free. Advocates of free education stated that the Constitution guaranteed freedom of teaching. Those in favor of *secular* education did not follow the old liberal principles of normalismo, but rather claimed that only the State is capable of issuing professional degrees. The Law 14.557/58 was enacted to ensure self-government to private universities; however, the State - and not National Universities - continued to issue decrees (A.A.V.V., 2002: 405).

Even though some restricted democratic governments succeeded – such as those of Guido and Illia – and that, eventually in 1966, a Bureaucratic-Authoritarian regime was implemented (Rapoport, 2005: 513), the policy of Developmentalism and the Human Capital Theory were practically unmodified until Campora's presidency. After that, there was an attempt to implement a Popular Education program during President Perón's short term. During this particular period (1973 to 1975), the role of education was undervalued along with the economy, even when development had not plummeted yet. This process correlated with the powerful alliance of national social sectors that supported Peronism to come to power again (Filmus, 2003). That program along with that notion of education was finally abandoned by President María Estela Martínez de Perón, who set forth the first authoritarian guidelines later developed by the military government of 1976 to 1983. The coup d'état that took place in 1976 initiated the progressive obliteration of the Welfare State in Argentina, which had got started right after World War II.

During the early years of the dictatorship, the leader of the Ministry of Education was Ricardo Bruera, who attempted to create a scheme as the essential basis of freedom through a combination of individual liberty and repression. In this period, the emphasis was placed on the technocratization of the educational system and behaviorism. After an ideological cleansing of the system, the idea of freedom emerged.

The sinister Operacion Claridad⁴, devised by the Ministry in accordance with the National Reorganization Process, established an espionage inside schools in order to account for professors, teachers and students who were suspected to be opponents of the government. Several democratic and pluralist projects were eliminated and an educational project that followed the Doctrine of National Security was devised and implemented. A brochure called Subversión en el ámbito educativo (in English, subversion in the school) started circulating with the aim of integrating, in the field of education, categories such as war, subversion, enemy and infiltration (Puiggrós, 1998:128). The military government highly interfered in the educational system. It followed the decentralization of schools and the transfer of finance and buildings. Cultural censorship was ferociously exercised on national and foreign authors and works, on the classics as well as on contemporary writings for children and university students, and on the arts and sciences. The aim was to normalize the students' moral standards by eliminating the cognitive hierarchy.

In the 1980s, Latin America began a modernization process which concentrated, at first, on the political sphere and aimed at the recovery of democratic regimes. With the enactment of the Act 23.114 in Argentina, the democratic government of Alfonsín (members of the Radical Party) called for the 2nd National Pedagogy Congress. This Congress established the following objectives: (i) to create a state of opinion concerning the importance of education for the life of the republic, and (ii) to set out the problems and studies around democratic consolidation. The change was oriented towards the modification of the prevailing development model and the beginning of a restructuring process of the economy that tended to include the region in the worldwide exchange flux of goods and services. Such a policy caused the conditions of all modern institutions to become more precarious. The concept of teacher's precarious working conditions - as a result of the precariousness of all types of jobs in the globalized and neoliberal context - makes reference to the pressures and adjustments that, during the last decades, have appeared in all public education institutions.

The Neoliberal project, which began half-way through the 70s and deepened in the 90s, brought about serious repercussions in every public and social domain, including health, working rights, education and pensions. These repercussions deteriorated the conditions in which those sectors developed and, consequently, labor became unstable and full of pressures, not in a circumstantial manner, but rather in its structure as a whole. Neo-liberalism is, it may be said, a mobile matrix that fosters change, but preserves its characteristic policies and principles. At present, the necessity of an

⁴ Operacion Claridad was the name given to an operation, implemented during Argentina's dictatorship, which aimed at fighting all opponents to the government in the cultural and education field.

Effective State appears, accepting certain state functions as part of a redistribution process. Back in those days, the boom of Neoliberalism in most average sectors of the Argentinean society took root in the adoption of a dominant discourse. The idea of an Efficient and Small State as opposed to a Big and Slow one was upheld. In the Neoliberal system of Argentina, the dominant economic sectors play a fundamental role. As a consequence, local and foreign economic groups execute and have executed this policy with the support of the traditional political parties that retain the power of the State. The dominant sectors centered on economy, particularly those related to the production of food goods and exports, had a predominantly crucial role in the period ranging from 1976 to 2001. This meant that those who had executed fiscal adjustment policies and State regression procedures at the social level were unconditionally supported by the political sectors of the ruling party in office at the time: 1976 to 1983, Junta Militar (a military group that seized power), 1983 to 1989, La Unión Cívica Radical, 1989 to 1999, El Partido Justicialista, 1999 to 2001, La Alianza.

What could be known as the “neo-neo” model may be recognized at this point (Rigal, 2004: 37). It means a fusion of neo-liberalism – with its emphasis on free market economy as political freedom – and neo-conservatism – which proposes severe limitations to the democratization of society through its concern with maintaining social order. The State nourished an economic framework erected as unique and as the last in history. The naturalization of this framework was established along with the impossibility of devising a sustainable alternative. Nowadays, social life is undergoing a process of commercialization, since the result of market advance is the growth of poverty, the decrease in public spaces (in benefit of private spaces), social exclusion, and the lack of fulfillment of basic needs in increasing proportions of the population. Rigal (2004) suggested that the different ruling governments in office, and in particular Menem’s (1989 to 1999), implemented assorted economic mechanisms that in the short term seemed to solve all economic problems. According to this author, the only solution would be the withdrawal of the State from the social sphere. Following this scheme, then, the possibility of thinking and using any sustainable strategy was highly unlikely. Under this policy, social life, and in particular the health system and education became more mercantile oriented. Numerous private educational institutions such as schools, academies, colleges and even universities emerged. This context led to an exponential growth of poverty that brought about social exclusion and marginalization.

In short, during Menem’s (1989 to 1999) and De la Rúa’s (1999 to 2001) governments, the State deepened the measures imposed by credit organizations and local power groups. Furthermore, the State abandoned its function as a direct economic agent (producer of goods

and services) and as a regulator of the economy. Consequently, the State became a subsidiary agent whose only function was to ensure the social and economic conditions that allowed the dominant groups to accumulate capital. The basic goods and services, such as education, health, housing and social security, were restricted and deteriorated, and began to be regulated by the logics of the market. Social policies were settled from compensations and focused measures. In an analogy to what occurred in the economic and political domains, a reform process of the Education System followed similar guidelines.

The pressure exercised by international organizations (such as the IMF, the World Bank and the IADB) influenced, and still does, Education Policies, by devising diagnoses, proposals and arguments about the educational crisis and its possible solutions. Furthermore, the circulation and imposition of documents and recommendations, elaborated by these organizations, are proof of their influence on education. They basically conceive of the educational crisis as a crisis of the efficacy and efficiency of the systems, which is manifested in the quality of services and their administrator: the State (Coraggio, 1992: 13). This process began with the sanctioning of Law 24.049, also known as Law of Transfer, passed on December, 1991. Legislation played a fundamental role in the reform process because it opened doors to the imposition of the Neoliberal model in the educational field. In Argentina, the origins of this process should be traced back to the last dictatorship. In 1978, some State-owned schools were transferred to the ownership, control and supervision of the provinces. This reform process consolidated right after a number of laws were passed (Feldfeber, 2000):

- i) Law of Transfer of Educational Services at High School and Higher Education levels (excluding university level), No 24.049, passed on December 6, 1991 and enacted in January 1992.
- ii) Federal Law of Education, No 24.195, passed on April 12, 1993.
- iii) Law of Higher Education, No 24.521, passed on July 20, 1995.
- iv) Federal Educational Pact, signed on September 11, 1994, and passed into Law No 24.856 in August 1997.
- v) Amendment to the Section of the Constitution about laws of organization and base of the educational system, which should be enacted by the Congress (Sec. 75, Subsec19, Constitutional reform of 1994).

As a result of the expansion of obligatory attendance and the structural changes of the system, the number of students per school, and per classroom, increased. This increase produced several changes in school organization, such as new functioning norms and prescriptions in the labor and curricular sphere (CTERA, 2005: 108). From its beginning, the educational reform in Argentina

was thought of to cater for a potential labor market – eventually – undervalued and disqualified. Simultaneously, the reform aimed at preventing more social conflicts led by the teaching sector hired by the State. The fundamental idea was that this sector could adjust to the reform so that it would not interfere in the significant growth in school enrollment, at the same time a severe devastation in infrastructure and financial resources was taking place. This process was known as the ajuste (Adjustment). Many changes were implemented in the structure of the educational system. For example, school attendance became compulsory. These changes led to a considerable increase in the number of students at school and in each classroom. This increase in the school population brought about several changes in the school organization. Thus, lack of predictability and careful planning led schools to impose new norms and regulations both at work and in their curriculum.

From that moment onwards, the lack of knowledge about the constitutive and inseparable axis of teachers' job - labor and pedagogy - was accentuated on the part of the government; the techno-bureaucratization of the system was strengthened and the social breach became more noticeable. The growth of the bureaucratic power in the jurisdictional provinces, at the expense of an undermined national unity, led to a decentralized instrumentation of the reform. Thus, the reform of the structure of the educational system was implemented differently in each province depending on their financial decisions. As of XX century, the policy of labor flexibility led each local government in each province to ignore partially the teaching Statute/by-law, the legal norm at the moment, and the teachers' union agreements. Under these circumstances, employers in each province made their own decisions arbitrarily, a fact that destabilized teachers' working conditions. Teachers' salaries lost their purchasing power significantly.

In line with this, Díaz and Inclán (2001) claim:

The underlying problem is that the intellectual and professional sense of teachers' jobs has been marginalized and their professional dimension has only been present in speeches. The most serious problem is not the impoverishment of their wage (the decrease in their purchasing power), but rather how teachers have internalized their role as employees. This means that teachers act as people who only have to complete the tasks and obligations assigned to them, even as a routine or without much effort. Teachers act as employees and, unfortunately, they internalize this role. Empirical data show how teachers in Latin America are forced to fight for their wage as any other worker: through protests, actions, and other ways of expressing themselves. (2001: 4) In accordance with the abovementioned CTERA document, the prescription that refers to obligatory teachers' training (carried out in extra working hours) involved an increase in the intensity of their job and in the complexity of their tasks. Headteachers' positions also bore greater

pressure and a rise in their amount of work inside and outside school. Teachers' workload was also incremented as regards time and number of students per class. The complexity of their teaching tasks implied new social and professional responsibilities that, in the past, were not always formal or explicit.

Work related risks in the education field have increased as a result of the new forms of intensifying-adjusting teachers' job, the complexity of their tasks and the lack of appropriate working conditions. Consequently, fatigue, physical exhaustion and serious pathologies have developed. Public education as a whole frequently deals with highly work-related risks, social violence and growing conflicts in working relations, with some degree of variation according to the region and the rates of unemployment, poverty and destitution. A well-known risky factor that exists worldwide is the number of students assigned per class in relation to the space available. Oftentimes, more than 25 students are arranged in one class in which less than 1.5 square meters are assigned per each student and less than 3 square meters for the teacher. In some school buildings, the student population often goes up to 1000 pupils, a fact that generally causes multiple problems for teaching, learning, and co-existing in general. This worrying situation in some schools is considered precarious.

The above mentioned features broadly illustrate the context in which Argentina's education is immersed, the situations concerning teachers' working conditions and the risk factors that affect teachers' health. In the next section, these risk factors will be examined in depth, and the way in which some teachers from Mar del Plata cope with them will be described.

Health issues at school

As a result of the conditions under which the education system of Argentina emerged (see Introduction section above), the image of the teacher was created around the rhetoric of effort, service vocation and the idealization of their image as actors for social change. According to Kohen "teachers' identity has been defined as an apostleship or as the diversion of a function, when they are defined as a second mother." (Kohen, 2002: 213) In all the interviews made to teachers, when the question was about their motivations to choose teaching as a profession, they all answered: vocation. This is not a minor detail since it shows how, after more than two centuries, the same issues still influence the way teachers' job is perceived by society and by teachers themselves. The idealized image of the teacher, and the speeches made about their duties, keep the real job of the teacher concealed not only from investigators, but also from teachers themselves. Deolidia Martínez (Martínez, 2002: 193) and Jorge Kohen (Kohen, 2002: 204) are concerned with the need to expose those hidden aspects of

teachers' job and of the relationship between their job and the process of health-illness attached to their duties. Teachers began to view themselves as workers and to get organized in unions between 1957 and 1973 (Vazquez and Balduzzi, 2000: 2).

Belatedly, they began to lay claim to better working conditions. Even though investigations concerning safety conditions and health disorders at work have been carried out for a long time, the field of education has not been studied in the same manner. The results of such investigations in the education field have not yet influenced concrete policies that acknowledge and take care of the current situation. In this regard, Martínez said: Teaching constitutes a section of workers whose right of occupational health is not fully ensured by the authorities – acting as their “employers”. This lack of concern involves the prevention as well as the medical and psychological care their illnesses may require. The available services of medical attention to treat psychic disorder are precarious (scarce and partial). (2005: 5) Prevention and contention policies are inexistent. Several studies (Bergalli, 2002; Lettieri, 2008; Esteve, 1994) have proved that a series of pathologies are common in education workers: dysphonias, lumbago, stress, high blood pressure, neurosis, depression, among others. The exhaustion produced by an excessive amount of working hours and, sometimes, by the journey back and forth to different schools, together with the uncertainty about the future, makes teachers lose their normal hygienic and dietary habits.

As a consequence of these pathologies, stress alarmingly increases. The answers provided by the interviewed teachers in this study reveal the frequency with which these types of pathologies appear. Even though they are usually sporadic at first, most of the time, they become acute or chronic later on. What is more, this serious medical condition might even prevent teachers from performing their duties. Apparently, health insurance providers (in this case, IOMA) cover the expenses of these pathologies, but their extreme bureaucracy generates many inconveniences and workers are pushed to delay their treatment or seek for other solutions. When Kohen reflects upon health and illness processes, he points out that life and health are developed all throughout the reality of the worker, including their job, family and everyday life. Health-illness is closely related to workers' collective and individual abilities to control their working and consumption processes. When the negative working methods are accumulated and intensified, and this adds up to deficient forms of consumption - derived from wage worsening- to cultural and family alienating patterns, and the lack of organization, destructive and exhaustive processes are fostered. These characteristics lead workers, individually or collectively, towards the illness centre.

In this paper, a set of categories of psychosocial risks within the teaching environment will be presented along with some testimonies drawn from the interviews held

with the teachers that participated in this study.

THE CASE STUDY

The case study approach has been a vital feature of qualitative research over the past century (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). Case studies evolve around the collection and presentation of detailed, relatively unstructured information from a range of sources about a particular individual, group, or institution, usually including the accounts of the subjects themselves. The main critique of qualitative case studies, however, focuses on their validity in terms of their subjectivity and lack of precise quantifiable measures that are the trademark of survey research and experimentation. In order to help increase the internal validity of this study, the triangulation technique may be used whereby data sources are collected over a period of time, from more than one location, and from more than one person (Cohen and Marion, 1994).

In this case study, the authors of this paper also working as researchers will explore in depth a group of ten teachers in their teaching contexts in a particular incident, with the intention of providing a description, explanation and above all, some judgment about existing assumptions which were held before the start of data collection with regard to teachers' working conditions in the Mar del Plata region, Argentina.

METHODS

Participants

Ten Argentine teachers participated in this case study. They were representative of the different sectors under scrutiny. The first five participants were primary teachers who had been members of the teaching profession for more than 10 years in average. The third interviewee was another primary teacher, aged 55, who, at present is undertaking administrative tasks at school as a result of having developed some kind of progressive blindness. The other four participants were middle-school teachers. One of them teaches Geography, another History and the other two Language and Literature. They are all graduated from Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina.

Instrument for data collection

All teachers held semi-structured interviews in which they were asked to answer questions related to their working conditions, trade unions, health insurance, and other issues associated with school life.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Interview to teachers

Four main categories of psychosocial risks in teaching

were selected from a CTERA document entitled *Riesgo psíquico en el trabajo docente* (in English, *Psychic Risk in Teachers' Job*), devised for the National Program of Risks and Safety in the School, as criteria against which the testimonies provided by the interviewed teachers were analyzed:

1. Psychological demands (effort) Demands that were increased beyond worker's possibilities to respond. With regard to this category, the interviewees referred to this situation by providing different points of view. For example, one of the teachers interviewed acknowledged that they were not prepared to confront their duties as teachers because they admitted they lacked the necessary training to do so. They do not feel that the pedagogic training provided by the university is adequate to cope with the daily practice of real school teaching. He said:

Teacher 2: I think that a university degree is useless because there is a great gap between university and schools. I believe that instead of getting an education, we are pushed to get a degree as a mere errand to eventually get a job. On the other hand, another interviewee suggested that most of the newly graduated teachers lack adequate qualifications and teaching skills to be in charge of a class. He attributed this fact to the socio-economic reality they are all immersed in and to the excessive demands of our contemporary society.

Teacher 3: Nowadays, the main function of the teacher and the school has been wiped out. The transfer of knowledge has been left behind, since the teacher is expected to be a psychologist, a doctor, a social worker, a server, a cook. As any other profession, teachers are suffering from the crisis of authority that governs our society as a whole. Some time ago, the word of a teacher was sacred even though constructive criticism was accepted. Today, teachers are the centre of threats, hits and insults.

These excessive demands generate in teachers a strong feeling of uncertainty and frustration. This last aspect reinforces the already mentioned idealized image society has of them. Teachers are trained to be considered a fundamental actor of social change; they are made to feel they have a moral duty in their teaching task. Frustration often arises as they constantly confront the impossibility of carrying out their job as they have planned, a fact that, gradually wears their energy out. At this point, concepts such as "teacher's discomfort", "burn out" or "tired worker's syndrome" become of common knowledge to everyone. This syndrome is defined by "permanent negative effects that affect teacher's personality as a result of the social and psychological conditions under which their job is carried out" (Kohen, 2002: 215).

Three different factors are repeated when this syndrome appears: emotional weariness (psychic energy is

exhausted), depersonalization or "treatment of relationships as objects" (negative feelings about work relations: cynicism, irony, harsh humor, among others) and disqualification or regression in their work performance (loss of skills, intellectual lack of interest, social isolation). The testimony of the first interviewee provides a clear example of this:

Teacher 1: The burden that we have to cope with every day in the classroom generates a great amount of stress in teachers. Most of the time, we feel frustrated to see that we can not achieve the goals we had set when we were being trained. Because of this frustration, some teachers are depressed and abandon their jobs, others are exhausted; everyday they tire themselves out in the class and then psychiatric problems arise... This syndrome begins to manifest in isolation until their presence in the classroom becomes almost unbearable; absenteeism increases and, most of the time, abandonment or change of job is the final result. The fourth person interviewed claimed that:

Teacher 4: It all began early in 2003, when I realized that I could not call the roll. I went to the doctor and he advised me to change tasks. I had never been absent to class. What is even worse, as most of the interviewees stressed, is that the appearance of this syndrome is extremely frequent in teachers, but still, health insurance providers do not contribute to ease this difficult situation. Along one of the interviews, some of the teachers referred to this by saying:

Teacher 9: Health insurance providers recognize most of the health problems teachers suffer from. However, we have to pay to receive psychiatric treatment and then we get a reimbursement. For example, I go to the psychiatrist every week and pay \$70, but IOMA, my health insurance provider (as well as of most teachers from this province) never pays me back.

Teacher 1: I do not use IOMA because my husband's insurance plan is much better. IOMA is too bureaucratic and we have to pay for every voucher we need.

2. Control. The loss of autonomy over the control of their own working process, or the strictness and dependency on extreme control generates discomfort in teachers. Most of the time, they consider the instructions received from authorities useless and a waste of time. In reference to this one of the teachers said:

Teacher 5: I do not think those Teacher Improvement Workshops run by the government are useful when the government provides us with a curriculum, a topic and a document we need to debate and summarize in four hours. These workshops have nothing to do with what actually happens at school.

3. The lack of social support, from authorities and co-workers, is a fundamental factor. Teachers feel they are

alone in their struggle; they are not helped by the government and their social claims are not supported by society or the media. What is more, teachers are the object of negative criticisms; they are considered irresponsible workers, especially when they exercise their right to be on strike in order to demand better working conditions. As regards this topic, some of the interviewees strongly expressed:

Teacher 1: The media do not help strengthen the valuable image of teachers. We sometimes hear things like: "...\$2000 for only four hours of work". They believe it is only four hours, but we actually spend a lot more hours at home planning classes, marking students' assignments, making reports and designing tests, among other tasks. What about those hours of work? Aren't they considered? We usually also hear "Ah, all teachers enjoy a three-month holiday break per year..." but I bet that most people would not enjoy administering exams on December 28th ... Parents regard teachers as daycare workers, so, when we are on strike, they wonder "where can I leave my child now?" I think school is not a daycare center; teachers, as any other worker, also have the right to go on strike...

Teacher 6: Teachers do not only work during school hours, we spend many hours working at home: we need to plan our classes, prepare the material we are going to use, correct students' assignments, write reports, among other things.

Teacher 10: Even though most teachers are well trained, society still expects a lot more from us. Nowadays, the school is the only place where a parent can be listened to. However, most parents, helped by the media, do not have a positive idea of teachers, mainly because of all the strikes. Many of them still consider the school as a daycare center, because they have to work long hours so we should take care of their children.

4. The last factor is related to compensations. Here, there seems to be an exception from what the theory states, since two of the interviewed teachers claimed that they

Teacher 10: I think I am one of the few teachers who are happy with our salary because I do not take into account the extra hours that we need to work at home... I can't complain!

However, those same teachers believed that their activity is not really valued by society and the government. The tasks they carry out outside the classroom and the pressures and difficulties they have to tackle seem not to be taken into account. Every interviewee mentioned the lack of understanding on the part of parents, the media and the government. This aspect should be highlighted in an attempt to understand the conditions of those teachers who were interviewed. For instance, one of them was a newly graduated teacher who was beginning to work as a teacher. Another

interviewee was a senior teacher, who was doing passive work (this means that most of her job has been reduced) and did not depend on teaching as her only income. Possibly, these two aspects should be considered. At this point, it might be necessary to provide more information about their salaries and the late achievements of union struggles to make further claims.

In his article entitled "La evolución salarial del docente universitario. Un análisis relativo de las remuneraciones de los cargos exclusivos (1988 y 2005)", Eugerio Actis Di Pasquale (2006) revealed that the results of several studies coincide in showing that the deterioration of real salaries in Argentina began in the mid 70s, when the old Import Substitution Industrialization model was abandoned and replaced by a series of Stabilization Plans (Roca and Moreno, 2003; González, 2003, among others). According to the abovementioned authors "up to 1975 real salaries grew till they reached a 14% more than salaries in 1970. During those years, salaries and labor varied in a procyclical manner. Clearly, the struggle for a functional distribution of income was favorable for those wage-earning people who were able to either keep up or increase their participation in the generated wealth. Afterwards, since the implementation of the military regime, the level of real salaries drastically decreased (in less than a month) more than forty percent."

From that moment onwards, a new phenomenon began to arise that would later establish and accentuate during the 90s: inequality in the distribution of personal income. It is well known that the analysis of the distribution of income could take one of two forms: functional or personal. The former is related to the remuneration received by factors of production, especially the workforce and the means of production. The latter refers to how income is distributed among the individuals or households in a specific society. In Argentina, more studies have been carried out concerning personal inequality, mainly because of its abovementioned deterioration and a lack of the necessary statistical data to calculate the functional distribution. At the beginning of the democratic period, the real salary reached a brief peak that was, however, less than that of 1975. At the end of the 80s, and beginning of the 90s, the purchasing power dropped abruptly, mainly due to a process of hyperinflation. Even though the salaries remained stable (in that reduced purchasing power) during the 90s, the structural reforms implemented in Argentina had a profound impact on the personal distribution of income that reached its worst level in the last ten years (Gasparini, 1999). These levels of inequality were very low, compared to those of other Latin-American countries. However, the pace in which inequality grew was much superior to that of those nations.

The social, political and economic crisis of 2001 triggered a devaluation process that stressed the already observed tendencies. The devaluation process affected once more the purchasing power of salaries, which

approximately dropped a 25%. In view of the continuous deterioration of the salaries, the government decided to implement policies of wage adjustment through non-remunerative increases that were gradually turned into remunerative raises. Some policies were also implemented concerning the minimum wage in order to slowly repair the purchasing power of salaries (Roca and Moreno, 2003). To sum up, the purchasing power of Argentine people dropped a 60% between 1970 and 2002. This deterioration is more significant when considering basic wages agreements, since, during the same period, the purchasing power of those salaries dropped almost a 70% (Gonzalez, 2003). At the same time, the gap in the unequal distribution of income increased in the last 30 years.

Sanllorenti (2005) stated that, after three years of frozen salaries, there were some adjustments that could not keep the purchasing power of teachers stable. Non-remunerative increases (those to which pension fund discounts are not made) do not make contributions to health insurance and are not taken into account for the Christmas bonus. On the other hand, complementary raises only helped to distort the wage schedule and they caused a decrease in the incidence of seniority in the total amount (since they do not take into account years of work). The schedule of CONADU covers basic concepts in the composition of salaries, such as relation between categories, seniority, among others (Sanllorenti, 2003; 2005). At the beginning of 2003, the worst purchasing power in the history of teachers' salaries was registered; they were, at the same time, the lowest salaries in the whole civil service. In 2004 and 2005, some other raises were made, but with a non-remunerative nature.

So far the psychological risk factors and the extent to which these may affect teachers at work have been analyzed. The following section will deal with how medical insurance providers assist teachers with the care of pathologies derived from those risks. All the participants interviewed revealed that medical insurance in relation to these pathologies is inadequate or even nonexistent. Concerning this issue, Martinez states that:

Generally, not all districts offer a treatment that is nearby and affordable, and the only choice they give is leaves of absence. Not going to school, not confronting the risk, getting annoyed because of the unfair situation, the abandonment and the distress suffered everyday might worsen the problem. It is very common to receive medicine as the only therapeutic treatment. Psychotherapy is not usually affordable in public health services or medical insurance providers. (2005: 7).

Consequently, teachers oftentimes must afford their treatment themselves. Some teachers, as was said earlier, after having been exposed to unhealthy conditions at work and thus developed some kind of psychological disorder had to be relocated in their duties. Even after the rearrangement of their tasks at school, some of these teachers never received any type of

treatment. In this regard, one of the teachers interviewed claimed that so far, after having been relocated at work, she has not been offered any kind of treatment. The only measurement implemented has thus far been a biannual control that seems to aim to check solely whether her problem persists. This is done, she says, to preserve her new job at school. It is important to emphasize that, despite all criticisms to their working conditions and the inconveniences their job may imply, all the teachers interviewed, especially those with more senior job titles, were satisfied with the choice of their professional career. They clearly pointed out that "the system gave them a lot", so they chose to stress the flexibility of the educational system that allowed them to carry out multiple tasks. One of the teachers interviewed was very happy with her teaching degree, since it allowed her to explore different working fields to which she did not have economic access. On the other hand, another teacher was pleased with the system that allowed her to continue working in other areas, despite not being able to work in the classroom.

Teacher 7: I have worked as a primary school teacher for 30 years. I always wanted to become a Language professor, but, because of economic problems, I could only afford to become a school teacher. However, this career has given me a lot of satisfaction since I could make most of my dreams come true: I was able to teach Language, to work with my students on a school newspaper that received an award in Buenos Aires, and to become a librarian, which I still am. Since I was a kid, I always had a vocation for teaching. I decided to become a teacher, nobody told me to.

Teacher 8: I have been a teacher for 32 years. I chose teaching because it was my vocation. I always enjoyed guiding people, teaching in groups. It is something I liked since I was a child, that's why it is my vocation.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that all interviewees share their vision of the school as a meeting nucleus of the community. They also vindicate their role as an instrument to foster social change, even though there might be many problems in carrying out this task.

FINAL DISCUSSION

What the abovementioned interviews seem to reveal is teachers' dissatisfaction with their working conditions in relation to the absence of governmental assistance in structural social and educational changes. As has been previously mentioned, the school seems to be the last stronghold of what is public. This is clearly reflected in the conflict between society's perception of teachers (not of school) and teachers' own perception of themselves. On the one hand, society generally expects more from educators than what they can actually give. The critiques about a society where the social framework was broken

in the 1990s do not appear in the form of direct demands to the government of the day, but rather to teachers. This might be happening because, according to most citizens, the school, its teachers and the education system still preserve the fundamentals of the school of Modernity. There are still great expectations about the potentials of the education system as the promoter of social rise and the improver of living conditions.

On the other hand, data from the interviews also revealed that teachers are not fully conscious of what could be called an identity. They find themselves constantly struggling between their teaching vocation and their role as workers of education. This could clearly be the cause of the fragmentation that is produced every time unions call for a cessation of duties. Teachers are constantly being attacked from the outside because they do not always act *en bloc* as a group of workers. Consequently, their role is trapped between social deception and urgent demands, such as those made by parents who want to use schools as daycare centers. As was expected, teachers as a social body were not impervious to the social reforms that occurred in the 1990s. Although the interviewees highlight the benefits of being part of the school system and of its flexibility, they do not regard those benefits as the result of a long struggle to assert their rights. However, those benefits are considered a gift emanating from a State that strives to maintain the status quo of education.

Unless teachers become fully conscious of their double potential to overcome social problems, the school - as the last stronghold of what is public - will continue to be a mere performer of government policies, instead of being the pivot for the social change as a whole. Teachers' double potential refers, on the one hand, to their ability to train and produce critical students, equipped with democratic awareness. On the other hand, it is in teachers' hands to confront, collectively, state policies that they believe are not convenient for the full exercise of their social rights.

Conclusion

After critically analyzing all the information gathered, an important question remains: "what could be improved or modified?" Even though the object of this study was not to provide definite solutions to these problems, some possible questions or answers could be offered so as to show a new perspective of the reality of teachers and schools in Argentina. A significant issue that needs to be considered is whether an improvement in teachers' salaries and health insurance services would really improve their working conditions. Clearly, that is not the best way to solve the problem since the structural problems of any system could only be improved by structural solutions. If government policies would only be focused on teachers working conditions, what would be done with issues concerning students? And with those of

parents worried about their children?

Throughout history, different political and national projects have established different educational models. A further issue to be analyzed is whether in this post-social era - in which neo-liberalism has failed even in those countries which proposed it as a solution to all their problems - a new emancipating proposal has been made to place, once again, the school in the central sphere, as the ultimate educational tool. Teachers' capacity of transformation is immense, and society is aware of that. It is crucial then for those isolated cases in which individuals have successfully put into practice what was mentioned above to begin spreading the word and thus become generalized. This is the way to transform the school system as a whole, which debates its existence among Modernity, Technicism (The Technocracy Movement), and the Neo-liberalism of the late 20th century.

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