

Publication status: This preprint has not been published elsewhere.

Being a teacher in times of precarization, intensification, and devaluation

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.14667>

Submitted on: 2025-12-20

Posted on: 2026-01-06 (version 1)

(YYYY-MM-DD)

Being a teacher in times of precarization, intensification and devaluation

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Abstract: This essay is guided by the objective of discussing the processes of precarization, intensification, and devaluation of teaching work, in light of the structural transformations in the educational field brought about by neoliberal policies, results-oriented educational reforms, and the commodification of education. From a theoretical-critical perspective, the essay problematizes the reconfiguration of the teaching profession under the neoliberal ideological framework, which converts educational work into a technical service managed through targets and subjected to the logic of efficiency and competition. The impacts of these transformations on both the objective and subjective conditions of teaching are examined, as well as the choice of the teaching profession in times of precarization, intensification, and devaluation.

Keywords: Devaluation. Intensification. Neoliberalism. Precarization. Teaching Work.

Ser profesor en tiempos de precarización, intensificación y devaluación

Resumen: El objetivo de este ensayo es discutir los procesos de precarización, intensificación y desvalorización del trabajo docente, a la luz de las transformaciones estructurales en el campo de la educación provocadas por las políticas neoliberales, las reformas educativas centradas en los resultados y la mercantilización de la educación. Desde una perspectiva teórico-crítica, se problematiza la reconfiguración de la profesión docente bajo la ideología neoliberal, que convierte el trabajo educativo en un servicio técnico, gestionado por objetivos y sometido a la lógica de la eficiencia y la competencia. Se discuten los impactos de esas transformaciones en las condiciones objetivas y subjetivas de la docencia, así como la elección de la profesión en tiempos de precariedad, intensificación y desvalorización.

Palabras clave: Devaluación. Intensificación. Neoliberalismo. Precarización. Trabajo Docente.

Ser professor em tempos de precarização, intensificação e desvalorização

Resumo: Este ensaio *suleon-se* pelo objetivo de discutir os processos de precarização, intensificação e desvalorização do trabalho docente, à luz das transformações estruturais no campo educacional provocadas por políticas neoliberais, pelas reformas educacionais centradas em resultados e pela mercantilização da educação. Por meio de uma perspectiva teórico-crítica, problematiza-se a reconfiguração da profissão docente sob o ideário neoliberal, que converte o trabalho educacional em serviço técnico, gerenciado por metas e submetido à lógica da eficiência e da competição. Discutem-se os impactos dessas transformações nas condições objetivas e subjetivas da docência bem como a escolha pela profissão em tempos de precarização, intensificação e desvalorização.

Palavras-chave: Desvalorização. Intensificação. Neoliberalismo. Precarização. Trabalho Docente.

1 Toward which horizon do we look?

The crisis of education in Brazil is not a crisis: it is a project (Darcy Ribeiro)

This essay aims to discuss the processes of precarization, intensification, and devaluation of teaching work in light of the structural transformations in the educational field brought about by neoliberal policies, results-oriented educational reforms, and the commodification of education. It seeks to provoke discussion on how these processes affect teachers' mental health, professional identity, actual working conditions, as well as the challenges related to the valorization of the teaching career.

Historically, teaching has been recognized as a profession essential to the constitution of democratic societies and civilizations grounded in social justice and emancipation. However, teachers have been facing a growing set of structural difficulties that weaken their work, as well as their social and professional lives, which are expressed primarily through three interrelated processes: precarization, intensification, and devaluation.

The process of *precarization* manifests itself in both objective and subjective ways. From an objective standpoint, contractual instability, evidenced by temporary contracts and the absence of career plans, combined with extremely low wages and the denial of labor rights, imposes a hostile working reality.

In the Brazilian context, it is commonplace for teachers to work in more than one institution in order to ensure their basic subsistence, accumulating exhausting workloads that lead to health problems, both physical and mental. This precarious reality is starkly exposed in public education systems (at the state and municipal levels) where temporary contracts and meager wages prevail, failing to promote even minimal professional recognition and valorization (Shiroma, Campos and Garcia, 2005).

With regard to the international context, the (market) logic of outsourcing and the reduction of teachers' rights is also evident, as denounced by studies such as those by Ball (2012) and Mundy *et al.* (2016) on educational reforms in Chile, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Precarization is also present in the subjective sphere of teachers' experiences, for instance through the absence of professional stability, the accumulation of functions without

due recognition and valorization, and the erosion of pedagogical autonomy, generating frustration, burnout, and a loss of meaning in work. Within this harsh reality, teacher identity, understood as a social construction, is likewise affected.

As emphasized by the sociologist Dubar (2020), the construction of professional identity requires social recognition, the valorization of knowledge, and insertion into a structure that enables the ethical and cognitive development of practice.

When teachers find themselves reduced to mere implementers and reproducers of content or institutional targets, their professional identity is affected. Consequently, this form of precarization related to identity is as devastating as material precarization, as it undermines a sense of belonging, motivation, and commitment to education.

Therefore, teacher precarization should be understood not merely as a matter of public policy or school management, but as a social and structural problem that directly affects the quality of education, student formation, and the very social function of the school.

The *intensification* of teaching work is another troubling process, referring to the quantitative (and qualitative) increase in the tasks assigned to teachers, without due compensation in terms of time, salary, or recognition, both social and institutional (Apple, 2003; Assunção and Oliveira, 2009).

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Indeed, the process of intensification materializes in an exhausting routine of multiple work shifts, in which, in addition to the classes teachers must teach, they are required to plan lessons, grade assignments, complete records, participate in pedagogical meetings, respond to external evaluation systems, and frequently deal with administrative demands. Thus, being a teacher goes beyond the role of a professional whose essential function is to teach.

As can be inferred, a (significant) portion of teachers' activities is carried out outside their official workplace and working hours, without any additional remuneration. This phenomenon is part of a corporate management logic that has come to permeate education, in which teaching performance is assessed through productivity metrics, thereby transforming teachers into *service providers* (Ball, 2012).

This reconfiguration of pedagogical practice imposes a technocratic model that underestimates the educator's critical-reflective role, creating an environment of control, surveillance, and constant pressure. As a result, a scenario of physical and mental illness among teachers emerges.

For decades, national studies such as that by Esteve (1999) have warned of the consequences of this intensification, culminating in high levels of stress, depression, and burnout among teachers, particularly in the early years of Elementary Education, directly affecting students' learning.

The process of *devaluation* of the profession, in turn, is not limited to the salary dimension, although this is a factor that certainly deserves emphasis. It is the social discourse that associates teaching with vocation, altruism, or a calling that contributes to the non-recognition of teachers as rights-bearing workers with specialized professional training.

According to Oliveira and Almeida (2025, p. 4, authors' translation), when teaching is imagined as a priestly stance, in which vocation, gift, and love are considered essential elements in the choice to become a teacher, "important aspects such as salary and career plans are relegated *to the background*", with teaching being characterized as a form of self-giving.

(Unfortunately) there persists in the popular imagination a (misguided) priestly ideal according to which teaching should not be associated with financial return, even though we live in a society governed by money. By disregarding this complexity, the devaluation of teachers' work is naturalized and normalized, hindering both the choice of and permanence in the profession, as well as the consolidation of public policies aimed at the valorization of teaching.

It is necessary to emphasize that Brazil's legal framework, namely the 1988 Federal Constitution, the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law, and the National Education Plan, clearly establishes the principle of teacher valorization as a structuring element of educational policy. These legal instruments provide for career plans, dignified working conditions, and teachers' professional development as pillars of education.

However, the discrepancy between legal frameworks and their effective implementation has been accentuated under neoliberalism, reinforcing the need for resistance, debate, critical problematization of our reality, and the construction (and implementation) of public policies that reclaim these foundational principles of national education. Thus, valuing teachers' work is more than a legal obligation guaranteed by law; it is an urgent necessity for the construction of a democratic, valued, and socially grounded education system.

In the face of this troubling scenario, this reality must be critically problematized and debated. Moreover, there is an urgent need to reconstruct teaching as both a profession and

a social project. This requires, beyond fair wages and dignified working conditions, recognition of the complexity of pedagogical practice and the valorization of continuous, critical, and socially situated teacher education.

More than merely preparing individuals to operate within this system, qualified teachers are needed to intervene in and transform social reality through education. However, for this to occur, teacher valorization cannot remain at the level of discourse alone; it must take the form of investment, public policy, and a commitment to the future.

2 The historical roots of teacher devaluation in a capitalist society

Within the context of a capitalist society, the devaluation of teaching work emerges as an intrinsic phenomenon, revealing not merely an isolated issue but a broader aspect of labor itself, constituting a major obstacle to the construction of a (truly) emancipatory educational system.

As denounced by Marx and Engels (2000, p. 63, authors' translation), "by proletariat is meant the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are compelled to sell their labor power in order to live". In other words, in order to survive within this system, the proletariat sells its labor power, its intellect, and its time to capital, becoming dependent on the remuneration it receives, remuneration that never fully reflects the value of what is produced.

The aforementioned authors emphasize that, in this process, the worker does not appropriate the product of their labor; rather, they are alienated from it. Beyond physical labor power, creativity, knowledge, and intellectual capacities are also transformed into commodities, subordinated to the needs of capital.

To understand the genesis of this problem, it is essential to analyze the historical roots of alienation in teaching work. In this sense, under the yoke of capitalism, teaching assumes idiosyncrasies that distance it from its (human and) emancipatory nature. Teachers, rendered unable to exercise critical autonomy in their labor activity, become *mere* tools within the broader labor and capitalist machinery, subjected to the logic of efficiency and standardization.

The devaluation of teaching has historical roots that permeate the profession. The teaching profession, especially in Basic Education (a reality that also extends to Higher Education teachers), has historically been associated with women and subordinate social

classes, which has contributed to its low prestige and remuneration (Nóvoa, 1993; Arroyo, 2000).

The naturalization of teaching as a vocation evasively disregards the material and functional conditions necessary for the exercise of the teaching profession. In Brazil, throughout the twentieth century, educational policies went through phases of educational expansion and the (de)valuation of education professionals, which contributed to this process.

The paternalistic logic of the *teacher-missionary* has prevailed, reinforcing the idea that teaching work should not aim at financial return but be understood as a social calling. Such discourse fuels the perception that teachers give themselves selflessly and, as a consequence, simply accept the adverse conditions imposed upon them. This historical configuration favors the persistence of the process of devaluation and, intrinsically, the processes of intensification and precarization in contemporary times.

According to Cardoso, Souza, and Ccarelli (2023), Brazil continues to face social and political dilemmas that hinder the full valorization of the teaching career. Therefore, understanding the historical roots of this issue is essential to recognize that what is experienced today is not an *isolated failure* limited to the present moment, but rather the continuation of a long-standing structural legacy marked by the erosion of the teaching profession.

3 The precarization of teaching and its contemporary manifestations

In contemporary times, the process of teacher precarization manifests itself in multiple and complex ways, reflecting transformations in working conditions and educational policies. The advancement of educational technologies, the adoption of digital platforms, and the spread of remote teaching have expanded teachers' workload while simultaneously intensifying mechanisms of surveillance, control, and accountability for results.

Oliveira, Del Pino, and Accorssi (2021) argue that the phenomenon of the *uberized* teaching labor, where digital platforms act as intermediaries replacing formal and permanent employment ties, expresses the neoliberal logic permeating contemporary education, reducing teachers to service providers and knowledge to a commodity.

In Brazil, recent studies indicate that the hiring of temporary teachers has expanded within state education systems, revealing a markedly precarious profile. Santos (2024)

analyzed this reality, highlighting the loss of labor rights among temporary teachers in comparison with tenured teachers, including contractual instability, lower remuneration, the absence of career progression, and restricted access to benefits.

Such a scenario highlights the segmentation of teaching labor relations, reflecting the logic of labor flexibility and the reduction of labor costs, central features of contemporary neoliberalism. Teacher precarization is not merely a conjunctural phenomenon, but rather part of a structural transformation of both labor and education.

Bourdieu (2004) points out that the educational field, increasingly oriented by criteria of performance, competitiveness, and quantified evaluation, naturalizes inequalities and restricts the autonomy of its agents. In this way, the logic of the commodification of education redefines the social role of teachers: performance is measured through productivity indicators, critical and emancipatory education gives way to the instrumentalization of teaching, and knowledge is devalued as a common good, assuming a utilitarian and competitive character.

In this context, teacher precarization is not limited to the reduction of labor rights; it also affects the construction of professional subjectivities, pedagogical autonomy, and the capacity to foster pedagogical practices that promote social justice and the democratization of knowledge.

In summary, the precarization and commodification of teaching constitute a structural process linked to neoliberal logic, in which education is increasingly treated as a commodity, teachers as service providers, and knowledge as a product. This scenario highlights the need for public policies that restore the centrality of emancipatory education, recognizing teaching work as an essential component in the construction of more just and critical societies.

4 Teaching work in the context of capitalism

The educational process has as its central objective the integral formation of the human being and, consequently, human transformation. However, within the capitalist context, this process faces challenges that affect teachers' health, well-being, and working conditions. This section proposes a reflection on the relationship between teaching work, labor precarization, and the structural conditions of the profession.

Teachers' work is a complex and multifaceted practice that enables students to access

learning experiences that transcend mere repetition. According to Freitas (2005), teaching work constitutes a singular form of non-material¹ productive activity, playing an essential role in the functioning and development of society

From this perspective, pedagogical work makes it possible to understand how broader social interactions are manifested in educational activities and in the daily practices of teaching. Based on this analysis, it becomes evident that teachers act as transformative agents whose impact extends beyond the limits of the classroom.

Teachers' work is fundamental to the construction of a more just, critical, and socially conscious society in which social and cultural interactions are valued. Therefore, the valorization and recognition of teaching work become indispensable for the development of an education that responds to social demands.

According to Araújo *et al.* (2024), when analyzed from a broader sociological perspective, teaching work reveals similarities with other forms of wage labor. As in other professions, teachers depend on the sale of their labor power to ensure their subsistence, without possessing their own means of production. This places them in a position of dependence on employing institutions, whether public or private.

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The precarization of teaching work in Brazil is evident and has been intensified by neoliberal policies of educational restructuring, which promote professional deskilling, loss of autonomy, wage reduction, and the degradation of working conditions. As teachers become wage laborers, they are subjected to structures that restrict their autonomy and creative capacity, often generating feelings of alienation, identity crisis, and professional devaluation.

Alienation manifests, for example, when teachers are required to follow rigid lesson plans and curricula, leaving no room for innovation or adaptation to their students' needs. In this scenario, educational work is reduced to mere task execution, dehumanizing teachers and turning education into a commodity. Thus, there is an urgent need to *sulear*² the pedagogical practices of these professionals

¹ "In the context of non-material labor, creation assumes a fundamental role. While material labor emphasizes the physical transformation of objects, in non-material labor, creation is manifested in the production of ideas, information, affects, relationships, and experiences" (Araújo *et al.*, 2024, p. 10, authors' translation).

² In this movement of resistance, *sulear* education, in light of Paulo Freire thought, means breaking with the hegemonic logic that constantly directs us Northward (toward imposed models and market-driven interests) and, in contrast, orienting our perspective from the South, from our own ground, realities, and knowledge. To *sulear* is to recognize the teacher's potential as a historical and political subject, capable of constructing knowledge from their own experience and that of the collective, reaffirming a pedagogy rooted in autonomy, critical thinking, and social transformation.

Teaching work, as a form of non-material labor, directly contributes to the formation of critical individuals capable of acting in society. Braverman (1980, p. 344, authors' translation) notes that teachers "bear the marks of the proletarian condition", highlighting the complexity of the profession in the face of changes in capitalist relations of production. From this perspective, teaching work shares characteristics with the proletariat: low wages, precarization, intensified workloads, and loss of rights.

Alienation, often silent, accompanies teaching practice, compromising creativity and the transformative nature of education. In the daily school routine, amid bureaucracies, administrative demands, and pressures for results, teachers find themselves entangled in a web that distances them from the essence of their profession.

Just like the industrial worker, teachers can become *mere executors* of tasks, detached from the authorship and meaning of their work. Standardized guidelines, performance pressures, and the devaluation of teachers' knowledge thus contribute to the dehumanization of education and the weakening of the teacher's very social function.

5 Choosing teaching in contexts of precarization, intensification, and devaluation

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In times when precarization, intensification, and devaluation are increasingly visible, choosing the teaching profession is not a neutral act: it is a decision laden with ethical, social, and political implications. In a reality marked by the growing commodification of education, where teachers are no longer seen as professionals but as *service providers*, the very act of aspiring to be a teacher constitutes a form of resistance against the dominant logic.

However, the choice to become a teacher is increasingly difficult to sustain, especially for younger generations. Novice teachers face a gap between the idealized profession and the reality they experience. While teaching is pursued as a professional activity, they encounter salaries that are incompatible with their level of education, exhausting workloads, inadequate working conditions, and an institutional environment often described as unhealthy, as reported by Farias and Wagner (2024) and Cunha *et al.* (2024).

Thus, entering the teaching profession tends to generate a *professional identity crisis* (Dubar, 2020), as it represents a moment of tension between the expectations that novice teachers hold and the real obstacles encountered in their daily practice. In this context, teachers' professional identity comes under attack.

It ceases to be primarily constructed through the valorization of pedagogical

knowledge, relationships with students, and institutional recognition, becoming instead strained by external pressures, such as performance targets, standardized evaluations, and discourses that blame teachers for students' academic *failure*, while *overlooking* the underlying issues

Holding teachers accountable for students' educational (under)achievement imposes an undue burden on them, as if they were solely responsible for the outcomes of their practice (Almeida, Miranda and Guisande, 2008). This discrepancy between the idealized and the experienced generates an identity conflict, fostering disenchantment with the profession, attrition, withdrawal, and teacher ill-being.

Regarding the choice of the profession, this reality creates a divergence: while acknowledging the importance of education, it is not promoted as a career of prestige and recognition. Moreover, even though teachers' work is not valued, the social responsibility associated with it remains, as noted by Assunção and Oliveira (2009).

Thus, this raises the following question: *what motivates someone to choose to become a teacher in a world where this profession is clearly undervalued? Why become a teacher in a system that treats its professionals as mere service providers?*

Nevertheless, when someone chooses to become a teacher without public policies that valorize the profession, there is a risk of turning their dedication into something merely *admirable*, romanticizing and naturalizing teacher devaluation as an inevitable part *of their mission, calling, and/or life vocation* to teach.

As previously mentioned, the construction of teachers' professional identity depends on conditions that foster it, and the absence of such conditions, such as recognition, institutional and social valorization, professional development, and dialogue, hinders its consolidation, resulting instead in negative experiences, reluctance to choose teaching, and even the abandonment of the profession by those still practicing.

Teachers who merely survive within this system, and who do not identify with the educational process, are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging to a social project (and political act) that education represents. In light of this, far from exhausting the debate on the subject, it is necessary to recognize that as long as precarization, intensification, and devaluation affect the teaching profession, there will be little space for an education committed to social emancipation, the promotion of citizenship, and the development of critical thinking.

Illness, physical and emotional exhaustion, career abandonment or non-selection,

and the loss of meaning in teaching work are not merely subjective phenomena, but the result of a vicious cycle in a system that, paradoxically, demands that teachers remain committed to their work while denying the minimal (and not even basic) conditions necessary to perform it. This is not about denying the transformative potential of education and teaching, but rather asserting that such potential is realized in contexts where teachers are protected, respected, and valued.

6 Psychosocial Consequences of Teaching Work

The impacts of precarization, intensification, and devaluation of teaching work affect teachers' physical and mental health, constituting a structural phenomenon that goes beyond the individual dimension. Research conducted by Gonçalves (2023) with Basic Education teachers in São Paulo reveals alarming data: approximately 32.75 % of them exhibit symptoms of burnout syndrome; 55.92 % report physical and emotional exhaustion; and 43.58 % experience burnout directly related to working conditions.

These figures reflect not only the overload of tasks but also the lack of institutional and social recognition, demonstrating that teacher distress is intrinsically linked to the structural conditions of work (Pessoa, 2017).

The intensification of teaching work, characterized by the accumulation of functions, multiple demands, and increasing pressure for results, heightens stress and contributes to teacher illness. When teachers fall ill, there is not only a loss of productive capacity but also a disruption in the subjective experience of work.

A sense of belonging, motivation, and the meaning of their pedagogical practice become compromised, directly affecting teachers' professional identity, which could otherwise be sustained by social recognition, pedagogical valorization, and ethical commitment to the holistic education of students.

Studies such as Silva (2017) indicate that factors such as the loss of social *status*, the proletarianization of teaching work, and educational reforms that disregard the real conditions of professional practice intensify teachers' distress.

These elements are not merely conjunctural but structural: neoliberal education policies, by prioritizing targets and performance indicators, instrumentalize teachers as task executors, limiting their autonomy and denying them professional recognition.

In this sense, illness, physical and emotional exhaustion, career abandonment, and

loss of meaning cannot be understood as individual failures, but rather as the result of a systemic cycle of exploitation.

Teachers' physical and mental health is inseparable from dignified working conditions, professional recognition, and the possibility of critical and creative engagement in the educational environment. Without such conditions, education becomes weakened, and the emancipatory function of teaching is compromised, transforming the act of teaching into an exercise of resistance against structures that undervalue its social significance.

7 In Summary: toward a teaching profession that (re)exists

The discussions raised in this essay reveal that the processes of precarization, intensification, and devaluation of the teaching profession are not fortuitous, but rather the result of a neoliberal (market-driven) logic that permeates contemporary educational systems, transforming education into a commodity and teachers into mere fulfillers of demands, sidelining their role as professional, formative, and critical agents.

In this sense, I raise a necessary (and real) problematization: *why allow teachers to be political, critical, and transformative agents if they can be driven to exhaustion by heavy workloads, poor working conditions, limited recognition and valorization, and reduced to mere service providers, falling short of their primary function?*

In the face of this harsh scenario, there is an urgent need to recognize teachers as political professionals. This requires the formulation and implementation of public policies that ensure dignified working conditions, salaries commensurate with the complexity of the role, professional stability, and the valorization of teachers' professional development.

Beyond reversing the decline of teachers' material conditions, it is about reclaiming and (re)creating the social significance of teaching work. Furthermore, it is necessary to foster pedagogical practices that enable autonomy, critical thinking, and collaboration among education professionals. Assessments should also be formative rather than mechanisms of control.

Initial and continuing teacher education needs to be (re)conceived from an emancipatory perspective, articulating theory, practice, context, and commitment to social justice. In conclusion, valuing teaching is valuing the future of society. Democratic (and quality) education is only possible with teachers who are respected, recognized, and adequately supported across all spheres: political, institutional, and social.

This discussion does not call into question the necessity or importance of this profession, nor is it intended to discourage future teachers from engaging in their workplaces. On the contrary, there is an urgent need for qualified professionals, ready to challenge and *sulear* this reality, and to be genuinely valued as agents of transformation.

Despite the adverse scenario, there are experiences of resistance and collective empowerment that deserve attention. Teachers' unions, professional networks, educational forums, and collaborative pedagogical practices have emerged as spaces for fostering professional recognition and valorization.

Teachers, as political agents, can transform their work into a collective act of resistance, promoting critical learning, citizenship, and social justice. Teacher valorization depends not only on public policies but also on the construction of support networks, the appreciation of professional development, and the fostering of dialogue and collaboration among education professionals.

Possible pathways include: the implementation of career plans with teacher participation, union negotiations that incorporate health and working conditions, continuous professional development focused on autonomy and critical reflection, and collective engagement with society to enable teachers to become agents of their own conditions and of their social project.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset supporting this essay is provided within the manuscript.

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