

Teaching in public schools: illness and the search for quality of life amidst precarious working conditions^I

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Abstract

Teaching work in Brazilian public schools, shaped by the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, has been marked by processes of intensification, flexibilization, and precariousness that directly impact teachers' working conditions and health. This study aims to understand the multiple factors that contribute to teachers' ill health in this context, as well as to reflect on possible ways to address these issues. It is grounded in the framework of dialectical historical materialism, drawing on contributions by Antunes (2009; 2014) regarding the metamorphoses of labor, in dialogue with Lacaz (1997) and Seligmann-Silva (2011) on worker health, and with Saviani (2015) and Freitas (2005) in the field of education. Methodologically, this is a qualitative study of bibliographic and documentary nature. The analysis shows that teacher illness is not limited to individual factors but reflects the contradictions inherent in the organization of work under the logic of capital, manifesting itself in the intensification of work, the expansion of control mechanisms, and professional devaluation, especially with the incorporation of new forms of school management. Such conditions contribute to teachers' physical and mental health problems, affecting their professional performance and the teaching and learning processes. It follows that there is an urgent need to develop and strengthen public policies aimed at promoting mental health, quality of life at work (QLW), and the enhancement of the teaching profession.

Keywords: Teaching work; worker health; working conditions; quality of life; public school.

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El trabajo docente en la escuela pública: enfermedad y búsqueda de calidad de vida en medio de la precarización del trabajo

Resumen

El trabajo docente en la escuela pública brasileña, enmarcado en las lógicas del capitalismo contemporáneo, se ha visto marcado por procesos de intensificación, flexibilización y precarización que inciden directamente en las condiciones laborales y la salud de los docentes. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo comprender las múltiples determinantes que configuran la enfermedad entre el profesorado en este contexto, así como reflexionar sobre las posibilidades de hacer frente a esta situación. Se basa en el marco del materialismo histórico dialéctico, recurriendo a las aportaciones de Antunes (2009; 2014) sobre las metamorfosis del trabajo, en diálogo con Lacaz (1997) y Seligmann-Silva (2011) sobre la salud del trabajador, y con Saviani (2015) y Freitas (2005) en el ámbito de la educación. Metodológicamente, se trata de una investigación cualitativa, de carácter bibliográfico y documental. El análisis pone de manifiesto que la enfermedad del profesorado no se reduce a factores individuales, sino que expresa las contradicciones inherentes a la organización del trabajo bajo la lógica del capital, manifestándose en la intensificación del trabajo, en la ampliación de los mecanismos de control y en la desvalorización profesional, especialmente con la incorporación de nuevas formas de gestión escolar. Estas circunstancias contribuyen al deterioro físico y mental de los docentes, lo que repercute en su desempeño profesional y en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje. Se concluye que es urgente formular y reforzar políticas públicas orientadas a la promoción de la salud mental, la calidad de vida en el trabajo (CVT) y la revalorización de la carrera docente.

Palabras clave: Trabajo docente; salud del trabajador; condiciones laborales; calidad de vida; escuela pública.



Trabalho docente na escola pública: adoecimento e a busca por qualidade de vida em meio à precarização do trabalho

Resumo

O trabalho docente na escola pública brasileira, inserido nas determinações do capitalismo contemporâneo, tem sido marcado por processos de intensificação, flexibilização e precarização que incidem diretamente sobre as condições de trabalho e a saúde dos professores. Este estudo tem como objetivo compreender as múltiplas determinações que configuram o adoecimento docente nesse contexto, bem como refletir sobre possibilidades de enfrentamento. Fundamenta-se no referencial do materialismo histórico dialético, mobilizando contribuições de Antunes (2009, 2014) acerca das metamorfoses do trabalho, em diálogo com Lacaz (1997) e Seligmann-Silva (2011) sobre saúde do trabalhador, e com Saviani (2015) e Freitas (2005) no campo da educação. Metodologicamente, trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, de natureza bibliográfica e documental. A análise evidencia que o adoecimento docente não se reduz a fatores individuais, mas expressa as contradições inerentes à organização do trabalho sob a lógica do capital, manifestando-se na intensificação do trabalho, na ampliação dos mecanismos de controle e na desvalorização profissional, especialmente com a incorporação de novas formas de gestão escolar. Tais determinações contribuem para o adoecimento físico e mental dos professores, impactando sua atuação profissional e os processos de ensino e aprendizagem. Conclui-se que há urgência na formulação e no fortalecimento de políticas públicas voltadas à promoção da saúde mental, à Qualidade de Vida no Trabalho (QVT) e à valorização da carreira docente.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho docente; saúde do trabalhador; condições de trabalho; qualidade de vida; escola pública.



Introduction

The central theme of this study is teaching work in public schools. In this regard, the decision to *investigate teaching work in public schools—focusing on illness and the search for quality of life amidst the precarization of labor*—is justified by the current imperative to understand the challenges and impacts that jeopardize teacher well-being within the public education system, a sector marked by an escalating devaluation and deterioration of working conditions.

The temporal scope of this study encompasses the decade spanning 2014 to 2024. During this timeframe, the enactment of educational policies fundamentally reshaped the organization of education regarding curricula, pedagogical practices, and teacher training. Furthermore, this period is characterized by an escalating process of labor precarization, which was intensified by the passage of the 2017 labor reform (Law No. 13,467/2017). This reform introduced significant amendments to the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT), thereby undermining established labor rights and redefining pivotal aspects of labor relations in Brazil (Brasil, 2017a).

In the realm of educational policy, two regulatory frameworks stood out during this period. The first is the National Education Plan—PNE (Law No. 13,005/2014), which establishes targets, guidelines, and strategies for improving the quality of Brazilian education (Brasil, 2014). The second is the approval of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) through Resolution CNE/CP No. 2 of December 22, 2017, which restructures the basic education curriculum by defining the essential knowledge, competences, and skills for student development (Brasil, 2017b). Given this context, it is necessary to comprehend how these dynamics affected teachers' quality of life to identify potential coping strategies, aiming to promote a healthier school environment.

The object of study of this research is teaching work in public schools and its relationship with the increasing illness among teachers. The central objective of this study is to understand the multiple determinations that impinge upon teacher health within contexts of labor precarization, as well as



to reflect on possibilities for addressing them. As specific objectives, we aim to analyze labor relations based on the neoliberal model of society; teaching work in public schools and its multiple determinations; and, lastly, teaching amidst the challenges of a context of labor precarization and the possibilities for resistance.

The rationale for this study stems from the interest in deepening knowledge regarding teaching work in public schools, a theme that drew the attention of the first author during her undergraduate degree in Pedagogy, through supervised internships and her participation in the Research Group on Work, Educational Policies, and Human Formation (GPTRAPEFORM), coordinated by Professor Silvia Alves dos Santos in the Department of Education, in addition to her role as a fellow in the Undergraduate Research Program. Furthermore, the study proves relevant given the direct impact that the school environment and working conditions have in affecting teachers' mental health, thereby influencing teaching quality and labor relations.

This study consists of bibliographic research. According to Gil (2008), bibliographic research allows for a comprehensive survey of the knowledge already produced on a given topic, serving as a foundation for new interpretations and reflections. Thus, utilizing a robust theoretical framework—which is often constructed through a systematic review—provides the grounding for analyzing the social fact under study. Furthermore, according to Ferreira (2009),

It is through the theoretical framework that researchers view the world, assign meanings, and make choices. Therefore, it is fundamental to know oneself to the point of identifying the trends, beliefs, and possibilities of a scientific approach in alignment with one's theoretical choices, thereby avoiding superficiality (Ferreira, 2009, p. 50).

Mainardes (2018) reinforces that the use of theoretical-epistemological frameworks not only enhances the scientific rigor of research but also strengthens its credibility and validity. According to the author, this foundation is a key element for articulating investigations with the researchers' prior knowledge, thereby enabling a more critical and in-depth analysis of educational phenomena, while ensuring the reliability of the study.



The method of analysis adopted was dialectical historical materialism, as it is the most suitable framework for linking the social fact to an understanding of the broader political and ideological relations that affect the problem outlined in this research. According to Masson (2012, p. 11), “the educational policy investigated is treated in its relations with the social and historical context and not in its apparent isolation.” In this sense, we can recognize that the research problem is interwoven and interrelated with the movement of history; hence, the current political and social conjuncture interferes with the dynamics of the object of study.

By exploring teaching work and the illness resulting from multiple relationships within the public school context, we will likely gain a better understanding of professional demands, in addition to providing insights for formulating solutions that integrate health, quality of life, and professional appreciation. Furthermore, by investigating teachers’ working conditions and their repercussions on the profession, we aim to contribute to expanding the academic debate, offering a critical analysis of a contemporary problem that urgently requires addressing.

New labor relations in the neoliberal context of society and the impacts on worker health

The world of labor relations has undergone several remarkable transformations over the final decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century; consequently, societies have been adapting to the developments of globalization, technological innovations, and the productive restructuring of capital. These transformations, termed by Antunes (2009) as “new configurations of work,” reveal a labor management process that reflects the coexistence of traditional and contemporary elements. As a result, these changes have brought implications for workers, involving both their relations of production and the ways they sell their labor power.



According to Antunes (2009), the transformations in the world of work derived from the processes of capital's productive restructuring gradually expanded, initially affecting core countries from the 1970s onward and intensifying globally in the following decades. In Brazil, this process gained momentum during the second half of the 1980s and consolidated in the 1990s.

These transformations introjected new forms of labor management by substituting the Taylorist-Fordist production models—predicated on stability and regulation—with more flexible and precarious forms of work aligned with the rising Toyotist model. The most recent transformations have resulted in the expansion of alternative arrangements such as outsourcing, temporary contracts, and informal employment. This highlights the predominance of a work organization system that maximizes productivity to the detriment of social and labor rights within an increasingly reduced timeframe (Antunes, 2009).

A key element of these new configurations is the advancement of so-called “multifunctional labor,” which has required workers to be in a constant process of seeking qualification within their roles to adapt to market demands. This requirement imposed on the worker tends to foster individualism and, paradoxically, weakens job security (Antunes, 2009). In this context, workers do not merely perform their customary duties; they also bear the responsibility for their own employability, subjecting themselves to continuous training and practices that frequently mask forms of self-exploitation, such as compulsory entrepreneurship.

The impacts caused to workers' lives due to transformations in the world of work are immense. Labor precarization, for instance, has directly impacted the physical and mental health of workers. The escalation of targets and the strategies to achieve them—as well as the pressure to meet them—contractual instability, outsourcing, and the erosion of labor rights have created an insecure working environment for workers, which, according to Antunes (2009), “deconstructs the bonds of sociability” and deepens alienation within the workplace.



According to Calcini and Câmara (2022), the advancement of ICTs and the adoption of home-office arrangements, regulated by Law No. 13,467/2017 and Laws No. 14,442/2022, have intensified what the authors call “digital subordination.” This integration has blurred the boundaries between personal and professional life. In other words, this digital phenomenon, which is increasingly present in new work configurations through computers, smartphones, platforms, and digital time-management tools, enables greater connectivity and flexibility at work; however, it significantly expands corporate control over workers.

Albeit this digital era allows workers to execute their tasks remotely—that is, outside the firm’s physical environment—it may also imply that labor demands exceed the standard workday. Digital tools such as emails, messaging applications, and task-management platforms are, in a sense, requiring workers to be available at any time, even during moments that should be reserved for rest or family life (Lacaz, 1997).

In this case, the boundaries between personal and professional life are weakened, as workers experience an overlap between both spheres. For instance, it is highly commonplace nowadays for individuals to reply to work messages during rest hours or to dedicate extra time to meet targets that could be deferred to the following day. Consequently, the breaks necessary for emotional and physical balance are compromised, contributing to the rise of issues such as stress, occupational burnout (Burnout Syndrome), and the difficulty of disconnecting from work (Druck, 2011).

Another relevant implication is the weakening of the labor collective. Within this dynamic, the logic of competitiveness—aggravated by the relentless pursuit of productivity and, thus, the extraction of greater capital—dismantles, to some extent, solidarity among workers, who begin to compete with one another instead of fighting for common rights. This contributes to the increase of social inequalities and structural unemployment, leaving vast contingents



of the labor force on the margins of the productive system (Seligmann-Silva, 2011).

Lastly, outsourcing has emerged in the world of work as a common practice aimed at reducing costs and increasing efficiency. However, it also results in precarious working conditions, such as reduced wages and the absence of labor benefits, exposing workers to situations of vulnerability. Conversely, the gig economy—characterized by temporary and on-demand jobs, such as self-employed workers and freelancers (rideshare drivers, couriers, among others)—offers autonomy to workers, yet lacks the security of formal employment contracts or access to basic rights, such as paid leave and social security (Da Mata; Almeida, 2021).

It is assumed, therefore, that these new configurations not only transform labor relations but also shape the manner in which workers perceive their own social existence. Labor, which might once have been viewed as a means of personal and social fulfillment, has nowadays consolidated into an activity devoid of meaning and fetishized by consumerism (Antunes, 2009).

These shifts in labor relations, driven by digital technological advancement and globalization, while bringing benefits to society, also heavily influence the relationship between employers and employees. Work that was previously formal and stable is giving way to temporary contracts and flexible, autonomous service provision, which, although offering greater autonomy to some, conversely intensifies precarization and inequality in working conditions.

“Under capitalism, the worker is frequently not satisfied in work but degrades himself; he does not recognize himself, but often rejects and dehumanizes himself in work” (Antunes, 2004, p. 9). Grounded in the critique of the capitalist system, its relations with labor, and its implications for the worker, work often ceases to be an activity that provides fulfillment and becomes a mere means of survival, marked by exploitation, alienation, and the loss of worker identity. Workers do not perceive the outcome of their effort as something



belonging to them or bearing meaning; on the contrary, they find themselves subordinated to a process that causes their physical and mental exhaustion.

This perspective from Antunes (2004) is directly linked to the issue of worker health, given that when work becomes a source of manipulation and solely serves capitalist interests, a series of negative impacts emerge that interfere with the worker's physical, mental, and emotional health. Oppressive work environments, long working hours, pressures, tensions, and, fundamentally, the lack of recognition from employers can generate illnesses such as stress, anxiety, depression, Burnout Syndrome, and even physical disorders resulting from repetitive strain or the absence of adequate conditions. This is corroborated by Lacaz (1997), who asserts that “work, when alienated and precarious, is one of the main factors of illness within the context of capitalist relations of production.” In other words, in the capitalist mode of production, the labor relation prioritizes productivity and profit to the detriment of other dimensions.

With continuous shifts in labor relations, such as the rise of digital or remote work and the intensified use of technology in the workplace, new demands and anxieties emerge for the worker. Even if technological advancement can facilitate and improve task execution, it simultaneously expands demands for performance and productivity, contributing to workers executing tasks during leisure and rest hours—that is, outside working hours. This supports Lacaz's (1997) assertion that the introduction of new technologies and current work organization generate new forms of illness linked to the psychological and emotional strain of workers.

If the workplace provides the necessary and adequate conditions for performing activities, workers may become more motivated and productive; however, if working conditions are precarious, negative factors intensify, exacerbating task overload, exposure to physical and psychological risks, and lack of safety, among others, which imply the onset or worsening of psychological issues like stress and anxiety, as well as physical injuries.



Lacaz (1997) highlights that the epidemiological diversities of harm to workers' health are vast, manifesting as diseases caused by how labor is organized and structured in society. First, one can highlight the work environment, increased competitiveness, and the intensification of mandated targets, which induce excessive pressure, a lack of worker autonomy, and an absence of organizational support. In this case, Burnout Syndrome (Brasil, 2024) exemplifies occupational diseases that reflect the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by these factors, which is highly frequently experienced in public schools.

According to Lacaz's (1997) framework, as a second point, the author addresses workers' inability to disconnect from their employment, when their professional activities breach the boundaries of the workday, invading and depriving them of their leisure and rest periods, thus interfering with the balance between personal and professional life. Today, Lacaz's (1997) discussions could easily be mapped onto the contemporary role of social networks and messaging apps such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, and *Google Meet* which were developed for interpersonal communication but have been co-opted as work tools where messages arrive at any hour, even on weekends, which ought to be the worker's rest period.

Lacaz (1997) also says that this issue of disconnecting from work encompasses home-based labor.

This is confirmed by Padilha (2009, p. 557), who states that:

Home-based work has also been viewed as a policy for reconciling work and personal life when, in fact, for both skilled and unskilled workers, it has been shown to contribute to a greater difficulty in separating the boundaries between work and free time. In other words, home-based labor activity not only introduces an intrusion of work into family life but can also signify an increase in work duration accompanied by intensification.

As a third point, we consider workers in the informal sector or those in situations of vulnerability. These individuals suffer more intensively from the



effects of neoliberal policies and the flexibilization of labor relations. They must cope with the absence of social protection, coupled with grueling work hours and low wages, rendering this demographic more susceptible to degrading conditions that compromise both physical and mental health.

According to Abramides and Cabral (2003), the implementation of neoliberalism brought about the deregulation of labor rights alongside the expansion of precarious work. The issue of labor flexibilization, which was supposedly meant to signify greater autonomy, translates in practice into insecurity, low wages, and a lack of guarantees such as paid vacation, sick leave, or a dignified retirement, rights that had been conquered over years of struggle. Furthermore, informal workers lack access to institutional occupational health structures, exacerbating the impact of adverse conditions.

Within this scenario of extensive transformations in the world of work, it is crucial to address the role of the State. For Antonio Gramsci (1999), the State is not merely an entity that imposes rules or exercises control through force; it operates more subtly within the structure of the “integral State” (extended State) concept, contributing to the production of consensus and shaping ideas to maintain the current order. That is, the State collaborates in building the hegemony of the ruling classes, even when it appears to be serving the common good. This leads us to question: why do public policies targeted at workers *which ought to guarantee dignified working conditions and safeguard health* end up being fragile, discontinued, or insufficient? Although the Unified Health System (SUS) represents progress by integrating occupational health into its responsibilities, we still face serious structural and political limitations that prevent this care from effectively reaching everyone in need.

In this sense, as Lacaz (1997) points out, it is not enough to have laws or programs on paper; political will, ethical commitment, and, above all, social mobilization are required for workers’ rights to become reality. We know that changing this reality is not simple, but we recognize that worker suffering is not natural; rather, it is the result of political and economic choices. A State



committed to life must listen to, care for, and protect those who build, every day, the foundation of this society: the workers.

Lacaz (1997) further argues that strengthening public policies depends not only on financial resources but also on political will and social mobilization—meaning everyone must be involved in the creation process. Thus, overcoming this problematic situation in the field of worker health requires joint efforts from governments, employers, unions, and civil society. Developing public policies that promote decent working conditions is crucial, recognizing the worker not merely as a productive force but as a human being with needs and potential. Lacaz (1997) reminds us that occupational health must be conceived as a right and not a cost, reinforcing that caring for the worker is, ultimately, an investment for society as a whole, even within the contradictions of a capitalist society.

The debate on worker health, situated within the context of the flexible accumulation regime, highlights the complexities and contradictions of the contemporary world of work. Abramides and Cabral (2003) emphasize how transformations in the productive model, guided by neoliberal logic, are implicated in the precarization of labor conditions and the undermining of workers' well-being. This reality calls for reflection on the humanization of work as an ethical and social imperative.

The flexible accumulation regime, characterized by technological innovations, outsourcing, and polyvalence criteria, has intensified the exploitation of the labor force. This model “expands the precarization of labor relations, intensifies rhythms, and promotes job insecurity” (Abramides & Cabral, 2003, p. 6). Workers face not only physical risks, such as repetitive strain injuries (RSI/WMSD), but also a growing impact on mental health, expressed through stress, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness.

Ribeiro (1997, p. 102) states that:

For capital, health—understood as sufficient health—is a simple and relativized component of the labor power commodity. Hence the habitual practice of hiring minors, keeping sick workers in production,



or, less frequently, recruiting sick individuals to work. These are the precepts and practices of capital regarding the health of the labor force.

Thus, the productive logic of contemporary capitalism tends to dehumanize the worker by treating labor power as a commodity. In this regard, the humanization of work requires redefining labor relations to place the worker at the center, prioritizing their physical, mental, and social well-being. To achieve this, it is indispensable to guarantee decent working conditions, such as the reduction of grueling workdays, safety in the workplace, wages compatible with the role, and access to effective public policies for the worker.

However, progress in the humanization process requires not only institutional actions but also active resistance from workers. Union struggle and collective organization must always remain on the horizon, as they are essential instruments to combat labor exploitation. Therefore, reclaiming the importance of social movements is a challenge amidst the growing demobilization promoted by neoliberal ideology.

Worker health and the humanization of work are, therefore, interdependent dimensions that call for a change in how society handles the world of work. Consequently, the commitment to this transformation must be not only an ethical demand but a necessity for developing a fairer society. Abramides and Cabral (2003) indicate that the greatest challenge is to reclaim lost rights and preserve human dignity in the face of capital's pressures.

Teaching work in public schools and illness: challenges

The teacher is the professional who contributes to the teaching and learning process, shaping the individual through transformative educational processes aimed at their humanization via the transmission and assimilation of systematized knowledge. Saviani (2015, p. 287) defines this process as follows:

[...] the teaching activity, the lesson, for example, is something that implies, at the same time, the presence of the teacher and the presence of the student. In other words, the act of teaching is inseparable from the production of this act and its consumption. The lesson is, therefore,



produced and consumed simultaneously (produced by the teacher and consumed by the students).

Based on this assumption, teachers are responsible for selecting, pacing, and organizing the contents to be addressed, the ultimate goal of which is to enable the student's development into an increasingly autonomous being.

However, many teachers confront a distinct reality within the current context of Brazilian education. Teachers, particularly those in secondary education, have been losing their autonomy regarding lesson planning, as they find themselves forced to deliver predetermined contents and ready-made instructional materials developed externally, thus preventing them from organizing their own methodologies.

According to Centa (2022), with the implementation of the New Secondary Education (*Novo Ensino Médio*), for instance, there are rigid and centralized guidelines that, instead of expanding teacher autonomy, restrict it, thereby limiting the possibilities for curricular adaptation to local school realities.

The educational landscape is marked by numerous challenges, such as work overload, pressure for results, and the emotional demands arising from the student-teacher relationship and the school environment. All of this has brought to the fore an issue that urgently needs to be debated: teachers' mental health.

From this perspective, Antunes (2014) analyzes the increase in outsourcing and the lack of formal employment ties in Brazil. Given this, it can be inferred that this condition excessively affects the working environment, including school spaces. In this manner, the precarization of teaching work can be analyzed through the growing utilization of temporary contracts, especially in secondary education, which, following the reform, can utilize tutors with "acknowledged expertise" (*notório saber*). This use of informal labor and the lack of labor guarantees for teachers align with the idea that the morphology of work is transforming, resulting in increasingly vulnerable working conditions for Brazilian educators.



Furthermore, Antunes and Praun (2015, p. 408) state that “the transformations that occurred in capitalism since the last three decades of the 20th century profoundly impacted the world of work.” In the 1990s, Brazil experienced intense economic and social transformations marked by its insertion into the new international division of labor, established within a context of dependent industrialization subordinated to global market demands. In this scenario, the labor force was subjected to a process of super-exploitation, characterized by low wages, intensified production paces, and prolonged workdays—a dynamic that can be applied to the teaching category from a contemporary perspective.

Within the public school realm, teachers deal daily with work situations that compromise not only their physical health but also their emotional and psychological well-being. Role overload, the absence of autonomy, and escalating administrative demands are factors that directly impact the quality of life of these professionals. As Padilha (2009) underscores, the reconciliation between work and private life for workers is frequently compromised. For teachers, since the commitments and tensions of the school environment invade their personal time, an imbalance is generated that harms their interpersonal and family relationships.

An issue that deserves prominence is the practice of remote work, which intensified across different sectors and in school education during critical periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this modality is seen by many as a way to reconcile work and personal life, for educators it intensified the workload, making it difficult to separate professional demands from other daily responsibilities. As observed by Padilha (2009), home-based work can signify a greater intrusion into the personal environment, expanding the duration and intensity of labor, with negative consequences for mental and physical health.

Within this context, it is essential to reflect on Quality of Work Life (QWL), considering that it is a widely debated topic in both academic and organizational fields. However, Padilha (2009) highlights that, in scenarios of labor precarization,



this quality becomes a distant promise for many professionals, especially teachers in the public education network. The discourse on Quality of Work Life (QWL) frequently presents itself as an attempt to humanizar capital, but in practice, it faces significant limitations when confronted with the concrete working conditions imposed by the capitalist system of production.

As Padilha (2009) points out, a significant advance in the pursuit of Quality of Work Life (QWL) entails the need to guarantee workers' participation in decisions related to their work. For teachers, this means reclaiming their pedagogical autonomy, which is often compromised by neoliberal educational policies that prioritize immediate results over reflective and transformative practices. Appreciating teachers and creating healthy school environments are fundamental steps toward overcoming the forms of labor exploitation that mark the educational reality.

It is necessary to rethink Quality of Work Life (QWL) within the scope of teaching work, not as a means to increase productivity, but as an end in itself that promotes health, dignity, and well-being. Only through consistent public policies and a collective commitment to valuing the teaching profession will it be possible to minimize the impacts of illness and redefine teaching practice in public schools, transforming it into a space of professional and social fulfillment.

Teaching in public schools, therefore, is an area fraught with challenges that often culminate in health problems for teachers. The complexity of this relationship between work and health is evidenced by the activity overload and the precarious conditions faced by teachers. According to Gomes and Brito (2006):

[...] teaching work in public schools is complex, encompassing numerous issues ranging from macro aspects—such as globalization and transformations in the world of work, among others—to daily classroom issues, such as, for example, the lack of chalk (Gomes & Brito, 2006, p. 59).

These countless factors contribute to building a work environment that can be exhausting and harmful to teacher health. A study conducted by Gomes



and Brito (2006, p. 56) in a state school in Rio de Janeiro demonstrates that “the effects of work are more acutely felt at the end of the year, in the form of greater fatigue, insomnia, or non-restorative sleep, anxiety, irritation, and stress.” Furthermore, they assert that the symptoms of illness among teachers are varied and highly concerning, including:

[...] general malaise, shortness of breath, low blood pressure, dizziness, fatigue, labyrinthitis, physical and mental exhaustion, vocal cord problems, respiratory problems, allergies, rhinitis, sleep disturbances (insomnia and non-restorative sleep), digestive disturbances, inadequate eating habits (which may imply medium- and long-term nutritional deficiencies), stress, increased anxiety levels, frustration, anguish, depression, and irritability (Gomes & Brito, 2006, p. 57).

According to the authors, these health problems do not arise in isolation but frequently escalate during critical periods of the school year, such as the end of the school term, when pressure and workload increase. This reality experienced by Brazilian teachers highlights the need to promote interventions aimed not only at improving working conditions but also at safeguarding the health of teachers who operate primarily within the public school system.

Given this scenario, it is of utmost importance that educational institutions and government managers recognize the value of building a healthier working environment for educators.

Overall, the relationship between teaching work and health in public schools is heterogeneous and varied. Work overload, precarious conditions, and symptoms of illness are issues that demand significant attention, discussion, and action. As Gomes and Brito (2006, p. 58) state, “what we found was that ‘work overload’ is related to the difficulties faced when dealing with the diversities and variabilities associated with work.” Therefore, it is undeniable that solutions must be sought to promote not only teacher health but also the appreciation of the teaching career.



A glimmer of hope: is teaching still worthwhile in a scenario of work precarization?

Historically, teaching has faced challenges that affect the historical function of teaching work. The current school context, in light of the implementation of neoliberal educational policies, has subjected teachers to increasingly high demands that place them in a situation of vulnerability. According to Freitas (2005), “teaching to the test” to achieve targets entails the loss of teacher autonomy regarding their specific planning, the emotional and physical exhaustion they experience due to the lack of recognition and support for the problems they encounter in the classroom, and, ultimately, precarious working conditions.

Although in our current society it is almost a redundancy to speak of ‘precarious work,’ a few workers manage to make their labor activity a source of pleasure, stability, and money. However, the majority find themselves forced, with greater or lesser intensity, to coexist with the various facets of job precarization (Padilha, 2009, p. 550).

Given this, an inevitable question arises: *“Is teaching still worthwhile in a context of labor precarization?”* As previously stated, the teaching profession undergoes intense challenges, ranging from working conditions to the absence of appreciation policies, both of which affect mental health, particularly if we take into consideration the factors disseminated by Padilha (2009) regarding the general meaning of work, where most factors cited by the author involve the contemporary challenges of teaching work.



Chart 1 - Synthesis of the bibliographic survey on teaching work and illness in public schools

Factors	Description according to Padilha (2009)	Relationship with Teaching Work
<i>Deregulation and loss of rights</i>	Flexibilization of labor laws, reduction of legal protection.	Reforms (NEM and EC 95) weaken teachers' employment ties and limit investments in education.
Legalization of temporary, part-time, and informal work	Hiring without guarantees or instability.	The increase in the hiring of temporary teachers (PSS).
Outsourcing and sub-outsourcing	Chain outsourcing, with the loss of a direct bond with the employer.	Outsourcing of educational services (such as school meals and cleaning) affects school dynamics and precarizes ties among professionals.
Intensification of work	Increase in required productivity without a proportionality of resources.	Teachers face overcrowded classrooms, multiple roles (lessons, meetings, planning, evaluations), and targets imposed by school networks.
Increase in the workday and polyvalence	Long workdays and accumulation of roles.	Dual-earner teachers operate in multiple schools to supplement their income, accumulating pedagogical, administrative, and social roles.
Exposure to health risks	Insecure and stressful work environments.	School violence, physical and mental illness, stress, and Burnout Syndrome are growing among teachers, compounded by a lack of institutional support.
Lowering of wages	Remuneration incompatible with work demands.	Devalued national floor salary (<i>piso salarial</i>), especially in states and municipalities, driving many educators into dual workdays.
Job instability	Frequent layoffs, temporary contracts.	A growing number of teachers work under precarious contracts, lacking stability and facing constant turnover.
Weakening of unions and collective resistance	Undermining of workers' organizations.	Campaigns against strikes and unions hinder teacher mobilizations and the struggle for better conditions.
Feminization of the labor force	Predominant presence of women in precarious positions.	Resulting from a historical construction that links the profession to maternal care, wage devaluation, and gender stereotypes rather than to real differences in capacity between men and women.
Strategic turnover	Layoffs and rehiring to maintain low wages.	Many education systems hire on a temporary basis and avoid tenure-track hiring (<i>efetivação</i>), preventing career progression.

Source: The Authors, based on Padilha (2009).



The elaborated chart underscores how the elements of precarization pointed out by Padilha (2009) manifest concretely within teaching reality—such as task intensification, the accumulation of roles, wage devaluation, contractual instability, and physical and mental illness. From this perspective, these elements are part of a historical context of weakening teaching work and teacher identity. This reality demonstrates that teaching work is embedded in a process of flexibilization and marketization of labor relations, where productivist logic overrides pedagogical and human needs. Furthermore, it can be noted that the weakening of unions and collective resistance actions has eroded the capacity to confront this process, which renders the need to recognize teaching as qualified work that demands decent working conditions, appreciation, and social protection even more urgent.

In this capitalist society where workers must struggle for their subsistence, the teacher is a worker who needs to receive a wage to survive (Dal Bello, 2016). Ordinance MEC No. 77 of January 29, 2025, which discloses the value of the National Professional Floor Salary for public basic education teaching for the fiscal year 2025, establishes that:

Article 1. The value of the National Professional Floor Salary - PSPN, for Public Basic Education Teaching, is updated for the fiscal year 2025 to BRL 4,867.77 (four thousand, eight hundred and sixty-seven reais and seventy-seven centavos), in the manner provided for in Law No. 11,738 of July 16, 2008 (Brasil, 2025).

Despite being higher than the minimum wage established in Brazil (BRL 1,518.00), this floor salary does not meet the needs of the teaching worker. According to DIEESE (2025), it is estimated that the necessary minimum wage to meet the needs of a Brazilian family in June 2025 should be BRL 7,416.07. This value presented by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE) is based on the basic food basket and other essential expenses, such as housing, transportation, education, health, clothing, hygiene, and leisure.



Hope, therefore, does not lie in the idealization of the profession, but in the concrete understanding that the teacher, as a worker in a capitalist society, has adapted to the world of work, subjecting themselves to the precarization and devaluation of the profession as a means of survival.

We must consider the teaching profession as the result of social labor relations, productive forces, class relations, and the conditions of social production. The historical context of the appreciation or devaluation of teaching work has reflected the contradictions between capital and labor, in which education is a field of disputes where the ruling classes seek to maintain their power and control over individual formation through schools, rendering the educator a mere reproducer of their educational conceptions (Oliveira & Santos, 2020). With the precarization of working conditions, low remuneration, and the absence of appreciation policies—factors that reveal the correspondence of this class relation within educational reality—the role of the teacher is reinforced as a worker who must submit to the interests of capitalism to survive.

Given this framework, being a teacher in contemporary capitalism equates to operating in a space marked by contradictions, where the struggle for rights and better working conditions expresses the pursuit of a dignified life and work, even while confronting the forces of exploitation stemming from the capital-labor relationship.

Considerações finais

It can be argued that teacher illness in Brazilian public schools is the outcome of a historical and social process expressed, in its broad sense, as a consequence of the logic of capital over labor. Thus, it is evident that the precarization of working conditions results from structural transformations in the world of work, triggered by the advancement of neoliberalism, which is predicated upon the productive restructuring of labor.



The effects of the capitalist mode of production directly reach schools and impact teaching work, precarizing and intensifying labor activities, devaluing the teaching profession, and increasingly destroying its autonomy.

For capital, it is far more advantageous that the teacher operates as a mere executor of predetermined tasks. Consequently, teaching—which ought to be a space for the socialization of knowledge aimed at emancipatory human formation through acquired scientific knowledge—ends up being transformed into a mechanism that reflects dominant interests, subjected to a production logic where meeting the demands of targets, rankings, external evaluations, and efficiency prevails.

As part of the logic of the capital-labor relation, there is a growing movement of illness among teachers, whose labor power is exploited and discarded according to the needs of capital. Therefore, we emphasize the urgency of public policies genuinely committed to the working class, which recognize the strategic role of education in forging critical consciousness and overcoming structural inequalities.

We further reaffirm that the struggle for better working conditions, health, and teacher appreciation transcends the interests of dominant economic groups; it is part of a larger struggle against capital. Despite the conflict between capital and labor, it is crucial for workers to resist and organize collectively, since it is through social and union movements that real possibilities for improvement in teaching careers and working conditions can emerge.

Ultimately, to be a teacher is, above all, to be a worker who must sell their labor power to survive in a capitalist society that exploits and socially devalues them. Choosing teaching, within this context, requires understanding that it is an economically disadvantageous profession, with the minimal objective of maintaining basic conditions within a consumer society. Teachers, as wage earners, have historically operated amidst the contradictions of a system that imposes the logic of capital as the guiding principle for labor relations in public schools. For this very reason, the profession becomes even more challenging,



as it brings together a blend of social commitment to societal transformation alongside working environments that contradict the premises of humanizing education and practice.

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Note

- 1 **AI Usage Statement:** Gemini AI was used as an auxiliary tool by the translator to assist in translating this manuscript from Portuguese to English. The final text was entirely reviewed, verified, and approved by the translator.





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