

The symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession: from narrative impoverishment to the production of sentences

A precariedade simbólica do ofício docente: do empobrecimento narrativo à fabricação de sentenças

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Abstract

The precariousness to which the teaching profession is subjected is a condition widely conveyed in our society. The examination of socio-media discourses, data and teaching narratives reveals the existence of a form of precariousness, irreducible to material precariousness, which we propose to name as symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession. In general, this form of precariousness manifests itself in the growing episodes of devaluation, delegitimization and de-authorization of the teaching action and enunciation. It reveals an impoverishment of the narratives and representations cultivated and transmitted about teachers. In the light of writings of philosophy and, in particular, of the thought of Paul Ricoeur, this article seeks to examine how this condition is constituted and affects the teachers and their narrative identity.

Keywords: symbolic precariousness, teaching profession, teaching suffering, recognition, narrative identity, Paul Ricoeur

Resumo

A precariedade a que está submetido o ofício docente é uma condição largamente veiculada em nossa sociedade. O exame de discursos sociomidiáticos, dados e narrativas docentes deflagra a existência de uma forma de precariedade irredutível àquela material, que propomos nomear como precariedade simbólica do ofício docente. De modo geral, essa forma de precariedade manifesta-se nos crescentes episódios de desvalorização, deslegitimação e desautorização da ação e enunciação docentes. Ela revela um empobrecimento das narrativas e representações cultivadas e transmitidas sobre professores(as). À luz de escritos da filosofia e, em especial, do pensamento de Paul Ricoeur, este artigo busca examinar de que modo essa condição se constitui e afeta os(as) professores(as) e a sua identidade narrativa.

Palavras-chave: *precariedade simbólica, ofício docente, sofrimento docente, reconhecimento, identidade narrativa, Paul Ricoeur*

Introduction

The precariousness to which the teaching profession is subjected is a condition widely disseminated in our society. This precariousness, it should be noted, manifests itself not only in dilapidated school buildings, in the lack of resources in schools, and the low salaries paid to teachers, but also in a large number of leaves granted daily to basic education teachers in the feeling of dissatisfaction, exhaustion, and discouragement reported by many teachers. These manifestations, due to their recurrence and severity, add contours – of quite a clear appearance – to the teaching condition in our country: “112 teachers get a medical leave per day in SP due to mental health problems” (Jesus & Mello, 2023); “Low salaries and lack of career prospects make teachers give up the profession” (Jornal Hoje, 2023); “Teacher is attacked by guardians of student at school on the coast of SP” (G1 Santos, 2024); these are some of the titles of recently published reports on teaching.

Indeed, the attestation of the precariousness of our country’s teaching profession seems difficult to refute. However, given this attested completeness, we ask ourselves: What precariousness are we discussing?

There is a form of precariousness, which is easier to name and verify and reified in degraded objects and constructions, in absent, outdated, and insufficient resources. As an analytical exercise, we will reserve the name of material precariousness for it. We affirm this is an analytical exercise because what is distinguished and named here with some clarity affects our daily lives in a joint and articulated way with several other dimensions of precariousness. While it is quite pressing, the precariousness of the teaching profession, as we will see, is not restricted to this material dimension.

Examining teaching narratives, socio-media discourses, data, and statistics on the condition of primary school teachers reveals the existence of another form of precariousness that, despite operating forcefully in our society, seems to lack proper naming and evidence so that it can be examined more carefully. In addition to the material precariousness to which the teaching profession is subject, another form of precariousness is at work that, despite its apparently more fleeting contours, directly and profoundly affects the subjects: the *symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession* (Fanizzi, 2023).

The *symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession* manifests itself in different materialities, more or less subtle. As we have seen in previous research, although the subjects singularly experience it, it is enunciated by teachers based on experiences and perceptions that share a series of common aspects. In general, this so-called form of precariousness manifests itself in the continuous and increasing episodes of violence, devaluation, delegitimization, and deauthorization of teaching actions and statements. It has to do with the way teachers perceive themselves and are perceived in our society. It concerns the narratives they tell about themselves and those we have said about them. It is also related to teachers' place in our social imagination and their appearance and recognition in the public space. We ask: What figures, symbols, stories, and memories have we sustained and shared about teachers? As will be developed in the following sections, symbolic precariousness seems to trigger an impoverishment of the narratives and representations we cultivate and transmit about teaching and school and the school experience more broadly.

If we propose the occurrence of a progressive impoverishment of narratives, symbols, and characters about teaching and the school experience in our social imagination, it seems important to reflect on what this process would leave behind. A void does not remain as such for long enough to become part of the world. This absence seems to give way to another form

of integrating the operation of the experiences of a subject that we could call a *sentence*: a concordant, univocal formulation with crystallized meaning that creates identifications. Unlike the narrative, whose function allows us to weave and “re-weave” life experiences, the sentence operates as if we knew in advance not only the intermediate episodes that compose it and how they are linked but also – and above all – its last page.

Based on these initial propositions, we seek, in light of philosophical writings, and especially the thinking of Paul Ricœur, to outline what we call the symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession, with the aim of better understanding how it is constituted, operates, and, in particular, affects the subjects. To this end, we will initially present the capacities that, according to Ricœur (2005), essentially characterize a human agent: these capacities, the author proposes, not only depend on the attestation of the agent as someone capable but also address a demand to the other, a demand that is essential to the reflections proposed here about the teaching condition in our society. Each action demands that the other attribute meaning to it; each action implies a demand for *recognition*. Next, we will discuss how Ricœur perceives the fabric, the configuration of these capacities, and the experiences that result from their exercise in the unity of a life. A life, Ricœur (2010a) proposes, is the story of this life in search of narration. Furthermore, this narration, as we will see, cannot be done in isolation, separated from the many stories told and retold by other subjects, as well as from the grand narratives that emanate from the social imagination; there is no narrative torn from the *inter-narrative fabric* (Ricœur, 2005) that constitutes us as humanity, as beings who live alongside others.

Thus, considering the inter-narrative fabric in which the thread of existence is woven, we will examine how the precarious condition of the teaching profession observed in our society affects teachers in the constitution of their identity or, as Ricœur (2016b) proposes, their *narrative identity*. The human being, Ricœur (2010b) asserts, “is a being who understands himself in interpreting himself and the way he interprets himself is through narrative” (p. 220). What happens, therefore, if regarding a particular group, people, or, in the specific case, a profession, while there is an abundance of univocal sentences, the social imagination lacks narratives, symbols, teachers, emblematic and memorable characters whose symbolic equivocality makes it possible for subjects to recognize themselves in them and, thus, narrate a story about themselves? Is there no room for the singularity that marks the exercise of the teaching profession, for the presence of teachers in schools as subjects vested with authority, and for the dignity of school experiences? We will examine these questions in the following sections.

Who is this person who acts? Recognition and capacities of the agent

*I waited for the noise that has surrounded me all these days to die down a little before speaking to you with all my heart. I have received an honor too great, which I have neither sought nor asked for. But when I heard the news, I thought first of my mother and then of you. Without you, the affectionate hand that you extended to the poor little boy that was me, without his teaching and example, none of this would have happened. Not that I attach much importance to such an honor. But it offers at least the opportunity to tell you what you have been and continue to be for me, and I can assure you that your efforts, your work and the generous heart that you put into it always continue to live on in one of your little disciples, who, at Despite the years, he has not stopped being his **grateful** student.*

Albert Camus (2024, p. 33, our emphasis) to his primary school teacher, Monsieur Germain.

For human beings, living always means *living together of many human beings* (Arendt, 2005). Only with others can our appearance in the world as unique and singular beings become possible. This is because our existence, our human condition, demands that we attest to it individually and that others *recognize* it (Ricœur, 2005).

Becoming capable, being recognized: This is the title attributed by Ricœur to the speech he gave when he received the Kluge Prize in 2005 in the United States. In it, Ricœur discusses what he conceives as the *capacities of a human agent* and sheds light on the two aspects that constitute them with the choice of the title. In addition to the capacities that the agent attests to about themselves to *become capable*, a *demand* is added, a demand addressed to the other, so that what would be merely a *personal certainty* is attributed a *social status* (Ricœur, 2005). Among the capacities of a human agent highlighted by Ricœur (2005), we will examine three of them for the sake of this study: the capacities to say, act, and narrate (oneself). Each of them, in turn, carries within itself the appeal to the other, the demand for witnesses, the search for recognition. Whether through struggle¹ or peaceful experiences, our emergence in the world as singular subjects demands this gesture that *extends* from the other to the self. “*Without ... the affectionate hand that you extended to the poor little boy that was me, without his teaching and example, none of this would have happened,*” says Camus (2024, p. 33) to his primary school teacher, Monsieur Germain.

Regarding the *capacity to say*, Ricœur (2005) points out that it is much more specific than the “general gift of language,” which is expressed in the plurality of languages, with their

¹ Ricœur develops this dimension of recognition in Ricœur (2010c).

different morphologies, lexicons, syntaxes, and rhetorics. To be able to say is to “produce meaningful discourse spontaneously” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 126, our translation²). Furthermore, it is this “meaning” that the capacity to say is clothed in that summons the other, which adds social to what would be an *individual condition*. When one says, *someone says something to someone* else. There is meaning, there is reference to the everyday world, and there is a recipient. This recipient is supposed to be capable of understanding, responding, questioning, and creating a dialogue with the speaker (Ricœur, 2005).

As for the *capacity to act*, Ricœur (2005) understands the human capacity to produce events in society and nature, a capacity that marks *a before and an after*. The capacity to act consists of a type of intervention that transforms the very notion of an event: it introduces contingency, uncertainty, and unpredictability into the course of things. Furthermore, from the capacity to act, it is not possible to understand an event as being *caused* by an action but instead *motivated* by it. Like speech, action is also oriented toward others; it occurs alongside other agents that can interfere with its appearance and course, which can help or hinder it (Ricœur, 2005).

Finally, the *capacity to narrate*, according to Ricœur (2005), occupies a prominent place among other human capacities insofar as events, whatever their origins, only become legible and intelligible when *recounted in stories*; “the age-old art of story-telling, when applied to oneself, produces life narratives which the historians articulate as history” (p. 126, our translation³). How the capacity to narrate one’s own story in its temporal sequence is articulated with the *other*, with the *social*, also seems to deserve attention. Even if a narrator intends to narrate the life of a single subject, a “narrative brings together multiple protagonists in a single plot; a life-story is made up of a multitude of other life-stories” (Ricœur, 2005, p. 127, our translation⁴). *When he heard the news*, Camus (2024) could not recall a “singular narrative,” an individual trajectory that would have led him to that moment of celebration. *His first thought, after his mother, was of Monsieur Germain*. In that circumstance, Camus recognized that at least two other narratives were entangled in the narrative thread of his life. Camus attributed *recognition* to Monsieur Germain regarding his narratives, actions, and statements as a teacher.

² "c'est produire spontanément un discours sensé".

³ “l’art millénaire de raconter des histoires, lorsqu’il est appliqué à soi-même, donne des récits de vie que l’histoire des historiens articule”.

⁴ “le récit rassemble de multiples protagonistes dans une intrigue unique; une histoire de vie se compose avec une multitude d’autres histoires de vie”.

From Ricœur (2005) onwards, it is not possible to think of the subject, an enunciation, or the narrative of a life in isolation. There is, in the human world, an inter-narrative fabric. Each person's story is always entangled in the story of others: we are, each of us, a segment of the story of others. Considering this unified fabric that constitutes us as beings who do not only *stay* in the world but *are* of the world, the philosopher Alasdair Macintyre (2001) proposes that we could only answer the question "What should I do?" if we know how to answer the other: "What story or stories am I part of?". In the wake of this reflection, it seems possible to propose that we would only be able to answer questions such as "Who am I?" or "What do I hope for my life and my work?" if we are also able to answer the question: "What story or stories are entangled with mine?". To inhabit the world and give it meaning, Jeanne Marie Gagnebin (2025) proposes, "the subject must dare to invent a story and dare to tell it. His story, but also that of all men before him, and those we tell ourselves and others."

A narrative response to identity

*My emotion at meeting my old schoolmaster warns me to make a first admission: it is hard to decide whether what affected us more and was of greater importance to us was our concern with the sciences that we were taught or with the **personalities of our teachers**. It is true, at least, that this second concern was a perpetual undercurrent in all of us, and that in many of us the path to the sciences led only through our teachers.*

Sigmund Freud (1976, p.286, our emphasis) upon meeting his old teacher.

What developments seem to raise the question about the *who* of an action, an utterance, or even a life? Even if, as we propose, the attempt at an answer to these questions would seem to emerge from the inter-narrative fabric that constitutes our life with others so that we consider the multiplicity of stories entangled in the story of a life, there is something of the identity of a *someone* that we hope to grasp in this answer. There is something about the uniqueness, singularity, or even the *personality* of that agent that we hope to find in the answer to the who of an action, an enunciation, or a life. However, what would be the contours of an identity capable of answering the question about the *who* of an action?

Pointing out a stable, complete, and unchanging identity over time seems, right now, insufficient to answer the question about *who*. Such questioning, in turn, seems to demand an

identity capable of remaining open to the affects of the action, the enunciation, and the experience, and, even so, preserving something permanent and distinctive. This identity can only be achieved by *telling the story of a life* (Ricœur, 1997).

In his work, Paul Ricœur (2016b) examines in great depth the notion of *identity* and how it could be configured as an answer to the question of the *who* of an action. The author begins his text, *Narrative Identity*, by pointing out an interesting aspect of the meaning of the word *identical* in Latin:

There is a problem, in fact, in that *identical* has two meanings corresponding to the Latin *idem* and *ipse*. According to the first meaning (*idem*), identical means remarkably similar (German: *Gleich, Gleichheit*; English: same, sameness) and, therefore, immutable, not changing over time. According to the second meaning (*ipse*), identical means proper (German: *eigen*; English: *proper*) and has as an antonym not *different*, but *other, foreign* (p. 266).

According to the author, the sense of *ipseity* is insufficient to resolve the relationship between identity and its permanence in time. However, Ricœur develops his propositions about what he will call *narrative identity* from this.

Ricœur (1997) proposes that the narrated story tells us about the *who* of the action. Without the help of narration, the author observes, the question of personal identity becomes an unsolvable problem: “either one places a subject identical to oneself in the diversity of his states, or one considers ... that this identical subject is only a substantialist illusion, the elimination of which only reveals a pure diversity of cognitions, emotions, and volitions” (p. 424). This dilemma, in turn, disappears when identity understood in the sense of the same (*idem*) is replaced by identity understood in the sense of a self (*ipse*). Ricœur (1997, p. 425) points out that the difference between *idem* and *ipse* is precisely the one “between substantial or formal identity and narrative identity.” A narrative understanding of ourselves is “the only one that escapes the apparent alternative between pure transformation and absolute identity. Between the two remains narrative identity” (Ricœur, 2010a, p. 211).

According to the author (1997, p. 425), *ipseity* escapes the dilemma of the Same and the Other since its identity is based on “a temporal structure following the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text.” Thus, contrary to the abstract identity of the Same, “narrative identity, constitutive of ipseity, can include change, mutability, in the cohesion of a life” (Ricœur, 1997, p. 425). Since it supports impermanence, narrative

identity is not a stable and flawless identity; it never ceases to be made and unmade (Ricœur, 1997). Just as it is possible to compose “several plots about the same incidents . . . , so it is always possible to weave different, or even opposing plots about one’s own life” (Ricœur, 1997, p. 428).

These are the contours of an examined life, a life “that never ceases to be refigured by all the true or fictional stories that a subject tells about himself” (Ricœur, 1997, p. 428), which seem to emerge when we evoke, with Ricœur, the idea of a narrative identity. Despite what the idea of identity appears to evoke in its first meaning, something identical, whole, whose edges are revealed unequivocally and stably, Ilaria Pirone (2025) points out that Ricœur was certainly not an “identitarian” – if we conceive the notion of identity in this unequivocal sense. This is because, by explaining that identical also carries the meaning of *ipseity* and juxtaposing its narrative configuration to identity, Ricœur shows that, for him, “identity is not something fixed, self-constituted, and transparent” (Pirone, 2025).

According to Pirone (2025), Ricœur transcends a narratological perspective and takes the narrative beyond the literary perimeter, making it surpass its status as an object to become a *function*. Narrative function is “the narrative process that, beyond a style, and its configuration as narrative, vectorizes our existence, supporting the construction of a reflexive relationship with oneself, with the other, with the world and time” (Pirone, 2025). As we will see, precisely, this narrative function seems to be affected when subjects are subjected to a condition of symbolic precariousness and narrative impoverishment.

Since it is rooted in time, in experiences, in the activities of examination, reflection, and thought, the narrative function implies movement and weaving and, thus, supports unfinishedness and enigma. It supports the incessant reinterpretation of our identity in light of our individual experiences and the *narratives that our culture proposes to us* (Ricœur, 2010a). Furthermore, here, we come to an essential point of our reflection. According to Ricœur (2008), in the operation by which a subject constructs for themselves an identity, or a narrative identity, they not only identify themselves *through a story* but also identify themselves *with a story*.

On the one hand, we identify ourselves when we designate ourselves as someone who... speaks, acts, remembers, attributes action to himself, etc., but identifying oneself also means identifying

with..., with heroes, emblematic characters, models, and masters, and also with precepts and norms whose scope extends from traditional customs to utopian paradigms (p. 90).

The author proposes that all these elements emanating from the social imagination remodel our personal imagination. Thus, the personal capacity to narrate is never separated from the narrative forms established in a given culture: it is based on stories already told that “offer each person resources of symbolization that help them to configure and reconfigure their own life” (Porée, 2013, p. 42, our translation⁵).

It is always possible that, when we come into contact with a narrative, whether it is the narrative of a life or a fictional narrative, we will be able to recognize ourselves in it. Furthermore, this movement of recognition may perhaps result in the benefit, as Ricœur (2017, p. 165, our translation⁶) points out about learning to narrate oneself: learning to narrate oneself “is also learning to narrate oneself in another way.” This particularity of narrative, essential to the proposed reflections, is highlighted here: “narrating oneself in another way.” A narrative always has an opening: there is room for the unknown. The narrative contains the enigma, the equivocality, the space for the agent’s revelation, and the subject’s emergence. There, the deciphering and the interpretation of the narrative produce *something new*. If the reading of narratives, points out Gagnebin (2025) in the light of Ricœur, makes it possible for us to inhabit worlds that are foreign to us, “narrative also allows us to constitute ourselves as subjects, without having to fix ourselves on a single, substantial and paralyzing identity.” The narrative of the self encompasses the known and familiar and the strange and foreign.

Walter Benjamin (2012), in his famous essay *The Storyteller*, says the following about the art of storytelling: “half of the art of storytelling consists in keeping one’s tale free of explanations. ... It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (p. 219). In narrative, there is room for discordance, for the unexpected, which we repeatedly need to weave into the elements that, in a more or less concordant way, have been configuring our life in a story. Ricœur (2010a) calls this plot, this narrative, precisely, a *discordant concordance*.

Perhaps it is something of this discordance, the unpredictable and even the *strange*, that is missing in the assumption of certain phenomena and destinies as evident and inevitable. Such

⁵ “Offrent à chacun des ressources de symbolisation qui l’aident à configurer et à refigurer sa propre vie”.

⁶ “Apprendre à se raconter, c’est aussi apprendre à se raconter *autrement*”.

evidence and inevitability often remain in explanations and information and, as we will see, in the sentences we construct and share regarding specific subjects and phenomena.

The plots of symbolic precariousness: *Who is this person who teaches?*

Brazil is last in the ranking of teacher prestige.

Terra News Portal (Palhares, 2018).

Based on Ricoeur's writings, we examine the reflexive mode through which the agent appears in the human world: the agent's attestation of the capacities to say, act, and narrate (themselves) is added to the demand addressed to the other for recognition. This reflexivity, as elucidated, is also present in how narratives of the self are constituted. In the operation through which a subject configures their narrative identity, they not only identify themselves through a story but also identify themselves with a story whose elements emanate from the social imaginary and participate in the weaving of our personal imagination.

What seems to emanate from our social imagination about teaching, school, and even the school experience? What narratives, figures, symbols, and memories have we shared and transmitted about teachers? What happens if these identifying figures are missing or become precarious in the social imagination? If emblematic characters, memorable for their uniqueness, are missing? Furthermore, what is more, if the others to whom we address the demand for recognition are absent, if something in the world, to some extent, seems to vanish? *How can a man feel about himself when the world disappears?*⁷.

⁷ *Speculations Around the Word Man*, a poem by Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

About narrative impoverishment: What do we say about teaching?

The condition that we identify here and name as symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession, manifested in the continuous and increasing episodes of violence, devaluation, delegitimization, and deauthorization of teaching action and enunciation, seems to trigger an absence or impoverishment of the narratives that we cultivate and share about teaching and, in particular, about the subject that gives life to this profession: the teacher. This, in turn, seems to mobilize such impoverishment?

Broadening our perspective of analysis, it seems helpful to evoke, for the scope of the reflections woven here, what Walter Benjamin (2012, p. 213) stated, already at the beginning of the 20th century, regarding modern capitalist society: “Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.... It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange our experiences.” This ability, however, would prove to be neither so safe nor inalienable at a certain point. For Benjamin (2012, p. 214), this ability’s deprivation would have been one of its causes: “Experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness.”

The experience, as well as the way of transmitting it, proposes Gagnebin (2025), would have undergone transformations and lost some of its distinctive features since the social conditions of common sharing have vanished. Nowadays, the author points out, “We tell many stories stripped of any interest, ... stories linked to individual and random experiences, which Benjamin designates under the name of *Erlebnis*.” Translated as “experience” or as “lived experience,” its invention responds to a new need: “the description of isolated individuals, whose experiences are lived under the sign of disorientation and also of an irreducible singularity, as opposed to a common sharing of the spheres of life” (Gagnebin, 2025).

From this perspective, there is, therefore, a difference between *Erlebnis*, which essentially designates an individual life enclosed in its singularity, and experience as *Erfahrung*, “conceived as an intergenerational and interpersonal transmission of know-how and a way of living that everyone can share” (Gagnebin, 2025). This distinction, it should be noted, not only refers to what we share in the everyday world and our ability to transmit and narrate experience but also has deep roots in temporality, in the way we inhabit time.

Thus, Gagnebin (2025) points out that this difference refers to social and economic transformations, whose pace accelerates with the development of industrial capitalism.

Erfahrung, in German, refers to the root *fahr, fahren*, a verb linked “to the slow crossing, full of trials, but also of discoveries in an unknown territory or country” (Gagnebin, 2025). It is through the narrative configuration of this long journey of experience – from which no traveler emerges unscathed – that we can transmit it to those who have the time to listen to it (Gagnebin, 2025). Therefore, considering the processes of the impoverishment of experiences and narratives seems to demand that we look at the time, the everyday world, and how and in whose company we choose to inhabit it and traverse it in our existence.

By restricting the limits of our analytical perspective a little, we could examine the current condition of symbolic precariousness of the teaching profession and the narrative impoverishment that it triggers, based on the consideration of the process of devaluation that the social image of the school has undergone in recent decades (Carvalho, 2023). Despite the difficulty in pinpointing exactly when a process like this began, José Sérgio Fonseca de Carvalho (2023) points to the 1960s and 1970s as moments that would have profoundly influenced the changes that the social image of the school underwent. Although long before this historical moment, as Carvalho (2023) points out, some pedagogical reformers, social activists, and public intellectuals had often made radical and quite pertinent criticisms of school practices, their social aspirations, and their guiding principles, these criticisms would have remained quite restricted to small social and intellectual circles. Thus, for a significant part of the population, throughout the first half of the 20th century, the school would have maintained what the author conceives as an “aura” of a redemptive institution in which society placed a vast set of expectations and hopes (Carvalho, 2023).

From the 1960s onwards, however, this image was affected in different areas of Brazilian and global social and political life. Specifically, in the academic sphere, Carvalho (2023) proposes that this rupture could be illustrated by the publication of important works, such as *The Inheritors*, by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, and *Discipline and Punish*, by Michel Foucault, whose reception would have caused some of the main pillars that supported the social image of the school as an emancipatory institution par excellence to collapse. The public repercussions of these works would have represented, according to Carvalho (2023), a hard blow to the hegemonic narrative about the school until then.

Carvalho (2023) observes that these changes and questions were gradually disseminated in social discourses, the media, and educational circles. At the time, literature, cinema, and even

popular music began to portray the school more critically. At the same time, student revolts in the late 1960s called into question the authority of teachers, the cultural choices crystallized in school curricula, and the school's own ability to respond to the challenges and hopes placed in it. Thus, the author proposes the social image of the school, "even if still today imbued with some residual nobility, and no more than that, will emerge from these two decades irreversibly disfigured" (Carvalho, 2023). School legality, De Lajonquière (1999) proposes, is currently progressively losing some of its color and some of its contours. Given this new configuration of the school's social image, it is certain that the teacher's figure would also be altered.

In the face of this "disfiguration" highlighted by Carvalho (2023), a question seems to emerge centrally and imperatively: How do we respond to it? How do we act in the face of these criticisms, which are sometimes radical and quite pertinent to school practices, their social aspirations, and their guiding principles? What emerges from what has collapsed from the image of yesteryear, and what other meanings do we attribute to teaching, school, and the school experience?

In the broader context of the modern era highlighted by Benjamin (2012), to the devaluation that the social image of schools has suffered in recent decades (Carvalho, 2023), as well as to the material precariousness and the effects of neoliberal discourse that are felt in a pressing way in schools⁸, we propose to add, to the examination of the issues highlighted regarding the narrative impoverishment of the teaching profession, some aspects of the condition that today seems to mark the educational field imperiously. It is forged from technical, impersonal, and productivist principles that repeatedly suppress the singularity of the teachers who practice it from the teaching profession, that which makes them *someone* (Fanizzi & Carvalho, 2024), an agent capable of saying, acting, and narrating (themselves).

Claudine Blanchard-Laville (2010) proposes that teaching is a profession in which the subject who teaches would be subject to two main ties: one with the disciplinary knowledge that they chose to teach and one with each of the students and with the group-class. How these ties are woven is absolutely unique to each teacher; there is no way to prescribe it based on evidence that points to more or less appropriate ways of doing so. How each teacher finds to weave and articulate these ties is a true *psychic footprint* (Blanchard-Laville, 2010).

⁸ Several authors examine the teaching condition from this specific perspective. See Silva, A. M. (2018).

The attempt to suppress the singularity of teachers or even the erasure of their “psychic footprint” occurs from a multifaceted process that daily operationalizes technical, impersonal, and productivist principles. This process is reified in the imposition of rigid and standardized materials on teachers, in the repeated and exhaustive attempt to control the actions and statements of teachers, in the lack of autonomy within schools and classrooms, in the excessive bureaucratic demands, in the extensive, impersonal, and restrictive forms that they must fill out regarding students and their practices. It is true that the working conditions, which are often materially precarious, profoundly affect the way teachers feel about their work. However, when we enter schools, we find that a core part of the complaints expressed by teachers is oriented toward the deprivation of the exercise of that which distinguishes them as agents, as subjects capable of saying, acting, and narrating (themselves) in their own name in the face of students, parents and guardians, and even society in general⁹.

The educational ideal, marked by technical, impersonal, and productivist principles, operates in a way that suppresses what we could call the “personality or personality of teachers.” According to Hannah Arendt (2015), *who someone is* is revealed to others through acts and words made and spoken in an everyday world. Rooted in the soil of uniqueness and singularity, acts and words allow an agent to actively reveal their personal identities, which is also unique and singular.

Furthermore, when rooted in the thought activity of the one who acts, the action is precisely “an action that does not exempt itself from its responsibility for the world” (Almeida, 2010, p. 864). Although not an action, since it occurs in an inner dialogue of the subject with themselves, thought is an activity, “an activity that has certain moral results, namely that he who thinks constitutes himself into somebody” (Arendt, 2004, p. 171). Thinking is part of how human beings can put down roots, able to assume a place in the world that is strange to us when we arrive; it is precisely from this process that what we generally call a person or a personality emerges, distinct from a mere human being or a nobody (Arendt, 2004).

Practices enclosed by technicality, impersonality, and productivity make the relationships teachers establish with themselves and others in their work fragile. By “other,” we mean not only the students, the subject taught, and even the ordinary world. Teachers no longer

⁹ See Fanizzi, C. (2023). The study brought together a series of testimonies from teachers published in recent reports, allowing us to verify this specificity of teaching complaints.

recognize themselves in their practice. Entangled in questions about “how to do it” and “why to do it,” it becomes difficult for teachers to testify in their practice “in the name of what” they teach, in the name of what principles they act and profess. Deprived of the choice about which part of the world and of the human legacy to preserve and transmit to students, there is also little left for thought activity. Action loses its roots and, ultimately, loses its character of action. It becomes behavior, as in the Arendtian sense: predictable, calm, determined, and functional (Arendt, 2015). It becomes behavior because, in its origin, it is no longer possible to recognize someone; there is *nobody* left.

If, as Freud proposes, it is *difficult to say whether what exerted the most significant influence on us and was of greater importance was our concern for the sciences that were taught to us or for the personality of our teachers, if, for many, the paths of science passed only through our teachers*, what happens when we base teaching and the school experience, more broadly, on the impersonality, superfluity, and disposability of those who teach? In education, there should be no traces or vestiges of the singularity of those who teach for the sake of effectiveness, productivity, and standardization. The psychic footprint that Blanchard-Laville (2010) talks about is precisely what must be swept away from the school grounds. If we do not have “someone,” how can we tell stories? *Who* can we tell stories about? Furthermore, would there be a transmissible experience capable of resisting the fading social conditions of common sharing?

Perhaps the repeated submission of teachers to the condition of “nobodyness” is an essential part of the impoverishment of the narratives we observe about teachers in our society. A digression also seems possible when considering certain peoples, races, social groups, and ethnicities. It appears that it is in the attempt to erase these subjects, in the imposition of a condition of nobodyness, that the process of erasing their stories also takes root. Silence takes root in the imposition of nobodyness, whether about a subject or a people.

In this way, narrative impoverishment seems to result from the erasure of subjects in their singularities and the opposite. When the symbolization resources that emerge from stories already told are exhausted, the narrative itself also finds itself under threat of emptying: the subject loses some of their capacity to unify and configure the diversity of experience in a narrative (Porée, 2013). The *narrative function* profoundly affects the constitution of these subjects’ identities.

From narrative impoverishment to the fabrication of sentences

Research indicates a possible “teacher shortage” in the country.

O Tempo News Portal (Pacheco, 2024)

No one wants to be a teacher in the future: Badly regarded, poorly paid, and mistreated.

Notícias ao Minuto (Pereira, 2018)

It does not seem possible to think of *emptiness* as part of the human world. If an idea, an experience, or a way of life is relegated to ruin or disappearance, something opportunely seems to occupy this place. What would the perceived impoverishment of narratives about teaching in our social imagination have left behind? This movement appears to give way to another form of integrating operation of experiences and experiences that we propose to call a *sentence*: a concordant, univocal formulation with crystallized meaning that manufactures identifications. Unlike the narrative of a life, the sentence operates as if we knew in advance not only the intermediate episodes that compose it and how they are linked but also – and above all – its last page.

It seems to us that instead of memorable characters, plots, and metaphors, instead of symbolic subsidies for the teaching narrative, our social imagination is full of assumptions, data, statistics, information, and reports that, before being used to weave narratives, are used to fabricate sentences. Sentences of violence, discouragement, exhaustion, and failure. Sentences of superfluity and disposability, which see the teacher as an enforcer of technical and methodological prescriptions. What they have in common is, precisely, the absence of the subject. They objectify and fabricate identifications and enclosures. In a sentence, there is no room for re-elaboration but for repetition.

A sentence, from this perspective, unlike a narrative, is a concordant, univocal formulation with crystallized meaning. It is refractory to the subject, to desire, to the imponderable, to the discordant. It is refractory to the experience. Everything in it is intended to be known. It lacks fictional power and symbolic equivocality since it envisions and conceives a subject as an identity that is *idem*, always identical to itself. A sentence brings together in itself the “insistence on always looking for our so-called self in the same place” (De Lajonquière, 2022, p. 18). There is no recognition in a sentence, but an identification that imprisons.

As we have already stated with Benjamin (2012), when telling a story, half of the narrative art is in avoiding explanations; in a sentence, everything is explained, known, and often “based on evidence.” Similar to the case of short stories, the condition of completion of a sentence does not allow for the “slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 223). It does not allow, as in narrative, change, mutability, or cohesion of a life (Ricœur, 1997). It does not allow the repeated making and unmaking of the stitches that, throughout a lifetime, change the features of the drawings that we make appear in the inter-narrative fabric and reveal our existence.

In a recent experience of training basic education teachers in the municipal network of São Paulo, a female teacher addressed us with the following statement: “*Today, I no longer encourage anyone to be a teacher. Before, I even encouraged young people, but today, I already know what awaits them.*” *Teacher shortage* is the name given to the phenomenon resulting, in general terms, from the process of emptying undergraduate teaching training courses and interrupting the teaching career of teachers already in service. According to the 2022 Higher Education Census, prepared by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP, 2024), most undergraduate teaching training courses have a dropout rate higher than the already high national average rate for undergraduate courses (58%).

Many others joined this teacher’s speech in a similar vein. They are justified by data on the number of teachers on leave from the classroom due to psychological distress, by episodes that testify to the harsh monitoring and restrictions imposed on teaching practice, and, above all, by the physical and psychological violence inflicted on many basic education teachers. Furthermore, it is no less frequent to see teachers being pointed out as professionals affected by incompetence and obsolescence, frustration, and discouragement. They are frequently perceived and portrayed – by students and society in general – as subjects who would be in a classroom because they have no *other option*. These speeches and episodes forge and reiterate the sentences we have today, as a society, fabricated about teachers, making it difficult for them to tell *other stories* about themselves. However, could these sentences – in their restricted and unequivocal form – truly provide meaningful insight into the teaching experience, as well as the broader educational experience?

How does the assumption of a particular future as unique and definitive – a sentence – seem to affect the experience of a subject and the constitution of their narrative identity? As we have seen, understanding oneself through narration considers the subject from the point of view of temporality. It not only encompasses what appears in the present but extends over the distension conceived by Augustine in his *Confessions* (Agostinho, 1964) as a “triple present”: the appearance of a subject in the *present of the present* (the time of attention) encompasses the *present of the past* (memory, stories), and the *present of the future* (expectation, promises). *Who someone is*, therefore, entails an identity that extends over time, a memorial and promissory identity (Ricœur, 2016a). Thus, the assumption of a sentence to the configuration of a life or a profession affects not only the projective dimension of our identity but the entire temporal dialectic through which it is constituted.

The statement that past experiences and lived episodes participate in the constitution and revelation of someone’s identity in the present moment does not initially seem to impose major questions on us. It is always possible, although it does not mean it is simple, to revisit the previous pages of the narrative of a life. How do we examine, however, the promising dimension of our identity, the one rooted in the present of the future? How does it become present in the time of attention – the present of the present? How does this dimension, or its absence, affect the emergence of someone? If we affirm the future nobodyness of a subject and attach their destiny to a sentence, there is certainly no need to wait for tomorrow. Nobodyness, illness, and failure also invade the present. At this point, what Ricœur (2010b) calls the *projective element of the narrative* intervenes.

Even though we do not know the end of our story since our life is not finished, the narrative we tell about ourselves is closely related to what we still expect from life: “The only narrative that is accessible to us is that... of a ‘waiting horizon’... it is the orientation toward the future, the dialectic between expectation and remembrance, which gives us something to project ourselves toward” (Ricœur, 2010b, pp. 221-222). We continue moving forward because our eyes always look at what is ahead, still outside our field of vision. They wait attentively for something to approach, since “the human being is fundamentally and primarily a being ahead of himself” (Ricœur, 2010b, p. 221). What we look at, paradoxically, is precisely the absent, the lack, the not yet written.

In the case of literary narratives, Ricœur (2010b) points out that every story has an ending. Even if a narrative proposes an open ending, the book inevitably has a last page, a last word, and this ending is sometimes capable of reconfiguring, of attributing new meaning to what has been narrated up to that point. At this point, a particular conflict, or at least instability, is imposed on the always-open narratives of those still alive. This is because the openness that ongoing narratives have within themselves holds within itself the ever-recurring pair of human affairs: fragility and power. Fragility, because the openness, the absence of the last page, forces us to make an effort to understand the present self – as well as that of the past – in light of an ever-unknown expectation; “there is a retroactive effect of the vision of the future on the way we reread our own past” (Ricœur, 2010b, p. 222). The lack of knowledge about it, however, does not exempt us from taking directions and making choices based on the fragile projection we make of the following pages of our narrative, nor does it mitigate how they affect us in the present. The fragility of the projective element of the narrative, however, is also, precisely, its power. The unfinished nature of the work, the absence of the last pages, allows us to be surprised by the future. It will enable us effort – although always subject to the fatalities that may befall us – to change the course of our story to a greater or lesser extent.

If “understanding oneself is being able to tell stories about oneself that are at the same time intelligible and acceptable, above all acceptable” (Ricœur, 2021, pp. 21-22, our translation¹⁰), what happens when this capacity seems to be reduced due to a future intended as univocal, a future about which “we already know what to expect”? Adherence to a sentence about the unfolding of an existence operates a kind of interruption in the narrative thread that a subject had been weaving about themselves until that moment. There is an interruption of time, a rupture of the idea of *duration* that encompasses past, present, and future. As a subject who then finds themselves identified with a concordant, univocal sentence, with crystallized meaning, intended as absolute knowledge about who they will be – and who they are –, we see their understanding of themselves and the constitution of their narrative identity change.

¹⁰ “Se comprendre soi-même, c’est être capable de raconter sur soi-même des histoires à la fois intelligibles et acceptables, surtout acceptables”.

Some final considerations

You become frustrated, feel like nothing, and feel diminished. You look at yourself and see who you are. Where is that person who fought to make a dream come true?

Alba – philosophy teacher in the state school system of São Paulo (Giammei & Pollo, 2019)

Who are you? – asks herself, teacher Alba, about the circumstances and situations she experiences at her job. The teacher feels constantly disrespected, “massacred by the government, by society, by parents, by students” (Giammei & Pollo, 2019). As we have pointed out, the material and symbolic precariousness to which the teaching profession is subject profoundly affects the experience of the subjects and the way they constitute themselves in their job. This condition has effects not only on the relationship that the subject establishes with themselves – *you become frustrated, feel like nothing, and feel diminished* –, but also on the way they position themselves before the other, throwing the subjects into a condition in which the experience of belonging to the everyday world is systematically emptied of its meaning. They lack both the self and the other.

From the condition of symbolic precariousness and the narrative impoverishment that it triggers, a progressive erasure of the distinctive place attributed to the teacher in the social symbolic fabric unfolds, a place from which the subject can appear in the world and be recognized by others as *someone*, as a subject who is expected to add something of themselves to the world. Deprived of this symbolic place, everything happens as if there were no longer a teacher among the characters that make up the narrative told by and about our society.

The difficulties of entering a symbolic order, an order of recognition, of *inscribing oneself within a we* (Ricoeur, 2008) profoundly affect the possibility of these subjects exercising their capacities as agents – those of saying, acting, and narrating (themselves) –, as well as their relationship with others. In “jobs of speech” (Ricoeur, 2008), such as that of teachers, the questions around the power or lack of power to say – and to act – represent something even more significant. How could teachers launch themselves into professing from a place of anonymity, addressing the other with an enunciation whose words are devoid of recognition?

They must be able to act, to say, to narrate (themselves) without, however, finding in the other, in the social, in the web of human relations, the recognition, the support, the resonance without which it becomes difficult for the subject to find ways of saying, of telling a story about

themselves. When a subject says, they always do so in a narrative *with others*. There is no way to do so in isolation without a place among others being foreseen and recognized. Faced with action and enunciation that is no longer recognized and legitimized by the other, faced with a logic that drives subjects to behavior and empty enunciation, it becomes difficult for the teacher to recognize themselves in their actions, in their capacities, or to consider themselves as a responsible agent for them.

Furthermore, as we have explained, the narrative impoverishment to which the teaching profession is subjected due to the absence of symbols, characters, experiences, and stories cultivated and transmitted about teaching in our social imagination seems to have thrown teachers into the confinement of sentences. In this, there is little or no space for displacements, for the metaphorization of meanings. Space for the subject's emergence, learning to narrate oneself, and, above all, learning to narrate oneself [always] in another way (Ricoeur, 2017).

In the logic of sentences, the subjects are objectified since they begin to be seen and spoken of by the other – and by oneself – within the strict limits of this formulation. The horizon of expectations as a space always open to the weaving and re-weaving of life is erased since it begins to be sutured, sentenced to the instant, supposedly known, static, and fated. The traces that the narrated experiences leave behind are swept away; we are left in a land without footprints, fragments, excerpts, and scraps that we collect to weave the story of a life.

In the face of sentences that silence and objectify the subject – who begins to be seen and spoken of by oneself and by the other within the strict limits of this formulation –, it becomes imperative to sustain conditions of possibility – symbolic and material – for the *presence of the teacher as an agent in their profession*, as well as conditions for the (re)telling of other stories about teaching and the school experience. Stories rescued from the details and nuances of the *school world* (Azanha, 1998) reveal something of the dignity of the experiences continually woven in this time-space. Stories that add layers of complexity and features to what, within such sentences, appear as rigid masks affixed to faces. Masks that serve, as Guimarães Rosa (2001, p. 120) suggests, “not for the explosion of expression, but for the shaping of forms, for the physiognomic dynamism.” It is these (always) alternative ways of narrating that allow us to catch glimpses of the realm of experience, as well as to sustain the horizon of expectations as a place of the unknown and the not-yet-told, a fundamental condition for inventing other ways of being and existing in the world.

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