

Identity and Meaning of Work for Portuguese Teachers

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Abstract: The processes of transformation that contemporary societies are now going through have contributed to the reconfiguration of and stress in the different realities of work and of the professions. In Portugal, during the last few decades it has been proved to be true that the different constitutional governments tended to legislate for reforms concerning the structure of the central administration. In the educational field, these political measures were expressed in countless decrees and standards, which have had repercussions on the lives of schools and teachers. New regimes were proposed like professional reclassification and reconversion (2008) and, more recently, the loss of teaching posts by mutual consent and the requalification of the workers, who were surplus in public services and bodies (2013). An investigation will be carried out in which the principal objective is the understanding of what teachers think about the impact of these policies on their work and on the (re)construction of their professional identity, thus permitting a wider understanding of what it is to be a teacher today. The investigation is of a qualitative nature with recourse to biographical narratives and documental research. This article will focus on a revision of the literature concerning the theme, while emphasizing that the quality of work undertaken by these professionals has a strong relationship with the significance that they attribute to themselves. Thus, in the case of the teachers, the meaning assigned to their work has an impact on their own teaching work and their professional identity.

Keywords: Public Policies, Meaning of Work, Professional Identity

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st. Century, reform of the Portuguese State has dominated the political agenda with the purpose of modernizing Public Administration, through the enactment of public policies and legal instruments that aim to promote a wide re-structuring of the global and immediate contexts in which the work of the professionals, who are carrying out their activities in the multiple domains covering the public sector like, for example, Education, is taking place.

This re-structuring focuses fundamentally on the increase in the functions and time dedicated to professional work, which reflects the intention of modernization through a reduction of costs and, consequently, the number of public sector workers paid by the State.

Thus on the one side there is an insistence on the importance of the quality of the work and its results with special emphasis on the value of professionalism based, among other aspects, on professional

collaboration and involvement in the diverse activities that take place in the school organization and also in the wider social context. On the other side, the pressure exerted in the sense of changing structures and mentalities can end up by interfering in professional performance, where factors of a material and emotional order are present, and in the quality of work, since the quantity, variety of given functions and excessive bureaucracy increase the feeling of a mission impossible among the teachers [1].

In this context of changes, an investigation of teaching work awakes interest among those that are committed to Education with the objective of understanding the impact of the social, political and economic transformations on the professional experiences of teachers and in their relationship with work.

To understand the meaning of work for teachers considering the recent public policies vested in decrees like the *System of Professional Reclassification and Retraining*, the *Program for the Rescinding of Teacher*

Contracts by Mutual Accord and the Judicial System for the Requalification of Public Sector Workers constitutes the central objective of the investigation that we propose to carry out. This text will focus on a review of the literature about the theme, by pointing out the public policies adopted by the Portuguese Government in articulation with the quality of teaching work, while revisiting the teaching profession with respect to the current contexts and their implications for the everyday life of teachers.

PUBLIC POLICIES AND TEACHING WORK OF QUALITY

For some time there have already been discourses about the current crisis in Portugal, which has brought with it countless present concerns about different contexts, and which has culminated in discourses directed at the non-fulfillment of the avowed objectives of education, society, politicians and the economy.

According to Tadesco [2] in the last few years something has changed. The crises do not reflect the phenomena of dissatisfaction in relation to the fulfillment of objectives, but rather, in the particular expression of the crisis of the number of layers of the social structure. In other words, it is not a question about circumstantial crises related to the capitalist model of development but of the emergence of new forms of social, economic and political organization.

This way, the crisis of the Social State, the economic-financial crisis and the crisis of work give rise to transformations in societies and individuals, which have consequences in the ways of constructing individual and collective identities and with the lone individual struggling with the growing contradictions at the level of his/her affirmation [2]. We are, therefore, passing through a profound process of social transformation.

Nowadays it is agreed that the society is considered not so much in terms of equality but in parameters of cost and efficiency in the name of modernization and quality of public services, thus creating, in this way, conditions for the peaceful reception of policies that do not respect individuals or their personal and job satisfaction [1].

In the educational field from 2006 onwards, this spirit of the marketplace has made itself felt through budget cuts that, with the passage of time, will become more relevant in the work and construction of the teaching profession. From the reformulation of the career status (2007) and reclassification and retraining (2008) up to the breakdown with the profession caused by the rescinding of teacher contracts by mutual accord and professional requalification (2013), Government

has justified its policies with the need to balance the public accounts.

Will this in fact continue to be the principal preoccupation of the Government; namely, to balance the public accounts? Or is it rather to take care to sustain an agenda for the profound transformation and gradual dismantling of Public Administration, thus carrying out the basis of an ideological campaign?

In the opinion of Cantante, Serra, Abrantes and Carmo [3], the current Portuguese Ministry of Education has begun a broad process of contraction, deterioration of conditions and ambivalence with respect to schools, which has been achieved from the very start by educational policies defined by the creation of very large school groups, a larger number of students per class, activities of curricular enrichment (ACE) taught by teachers from other schools and the end of the single subject teacher, amongst others changes. These are considered to be essential strategies that, on the one hand, obtain an automatic reduction in the number of teachers in post and, on the other, would seem to be intended to make the work harder for those that continue to carry on in the profession, thus demotivating them to the point of 'inviting' them to give up the profession that they have experienced and constructed throughout their lives.

Is it, then, the principal objective of the Government - with its successive publication of legislation - to instigate the early abandonment of the profession, namely, by teachers?

The national public policies seem to advance this belief by focusing on programs concerning the re-structuring of public administration like: the *Program for the Re-structuring of the Central Administration of the State* [27] and the *Plan for the Reduction and Improvement of the Central Administration of the State* [28].

By consulting the PRACE [27] proposals, it can be noticed, when searched, that there is the start of an all-embracing reform that wished to re-structure and rationalize the structures of administration according to the tasks of the ministries, which had the following aims: i) to modernize and rationalize the central administration; ii) to improve the quality of services provided to the citizens by the administration and iii) to bring the central administration closer to and open to dialogue with the citizen. All of this with efficiency gains that permitted the reduction of the number of services and resources that affect them. That is to say in the words of the 17th. Portuguese Constitutional Government, it wanted to make its diagnosis and structural reform of the Public Central Administration better by the establishment of an instrument of economic, social and cultural development that supports

the country and its assertiveness and relevance at the international level.

In the opinion of the technical commission that drew up the Final Global Report of PRACE program [27] it brought about structural conditions within the public bodies for them to be competitive by controlling their activity, through their results. Therefore, they instigated the creation of indicators of management and the introduction of new processes of control/evaluation of the public services with the identification of key indicators of realization or performance. Thus, evaluation has come to play a crucial part in the processes of management and administration, which are calling for the construction of indicators for the measurement of efficiency, efficacy, economy, ethics and quality.

In Portugal, the desire to comply with the standard and inspected duties, which the Government provided, made themselves felt straight away, at least, in the educational contexts, thus altering the life of schools and teachers in an irreversible way with the publication of the System of Professional Reclassification and Retraining. For the teachers, this provided evidence of a persistence in pursuing the philosophy of cutting back of teaching personnel, cloaked in the name of the quality of the public services.

In 2011, the *Plan for the Reduction and Improvement of the Central Administration of the State* [28] continued to show the express intention of eliminating the overlapping structures in the structure of the State by reducing the number of bodies and entities, while claiming to maintain the quality of performance of the public service.

With the same purpose in mind in 2013, the 19th Constitutional Government by means of decrees regulating the program for reducing permanent teachers - called the Program for Rescinding Teacher Contracts by Mutual Accord - established its duration, the requisites and specific conditions to apply and the legal procedures of the prior process for agreeing to the suspension of the working contract in the Civil Service for an indefinite period.

This program fits in with the scope of the carrying out of a rationalized management of human resources in Public Administration in the purpose of public interest but, such as for the other programs, it was reduced to the purpose of diminishing the responsibilities and the expense of the State [29].

In this way, it hides ideological intentions by affirming that it kept the right of the liberty of discontinuing the judicial relationship of employment

with recourse to mutual accord, as enshrined in the current regulatory framework of labor relations.

However, is it possible to say, when a teacher agrees to leave the Civil Service, what is the main cause? Is it the right of liberty or due to the burden and disillusion with a profession that has become demotivating and meaningless, since it has become thus for many teachers?

New legislation continues to be promulgated, namely the Law n° 80/2013 [30] for establishing the Judicial System for Requalification of public sector workers with its specific claim of being regulated for teachers. This system has been reported on various times in the mass media, which has referred, essentially, to the difficulty of consensus between the Government and the Labor Unions, although with the hope that it will be a reality in Portuguese schools by February 2015.

In view of the intentions announced in the programs developed by the leaders and their justifications in the introductory notes of the respective legislation, it is important to reflect if the Government will be, as it asserts, preoccupied in improving the working conditions of the teachers and valuing their profession or if it simply intends to issue a set of alternatives (in this case, of abandonment) at the disposal of teachers, so that they can decide for themselves which way to opt. It will become, therefore, an opportunity for analyzing the feeling(s) about the national policies in relation to Education and, more specifically, to teaching.

There is no doubt that the quality of teaching work is fundamental for a comprehensive and significant education in which, besides the impact of management and curricular programs, the improvement of teacher competencies also assumes a central role in this process. In this sense, the training of teachers can play an important function in the configuration of a 'new' teaching professionalism, thus stimulating the emergence of a professional culture in the bosom of the teaching profession [4], [5]. Nevertheless, this author also states that personal development and involvement in school projects has been forgotten and that this oversight makes it such that the training is like a point of reference for the professional development of teachers from the double perspective of both the individual teacher and the whole teaching force.

In relation to personal qualities, Day [6: 100] stresses *the commitment* of the teacher to (his/her) work, as being a characteristic that makes possible the other qualities and which "is intimately related with professional fulfillment, moral, motivation and identity". In other words, commitment has different meanings for different people, despite its general

characteristics, which include enthusiasm, caring, hard work and the awareness of the need of being preoccupied with his/her own continuous development, as well as that of the students.

Affection for the students is another characteristic that contributes for a positive attitude in relation to learning: patience, perseverance, support for the self-esteem of the students and a sense of humor are observable, when there is a relationship of respect for and empathy with the students. The researcher Darling-Hammond [7: 200] adds that also important is “an understanding of the students, of their learning and of their development”. That is to say, it is fundamental to understand the students in order to identify the best strategies for helping them and also that they have different needs or learning difficult.

Scientific and didactic knowledge of the subject to be taught is another characteristic that distinguishes the (good) teachers, who are capable, for example, of selecting the concepts or the more relevant information and making it simpler to learn by the students.

Teacher quality is not limited by the acquisition and use of this knowledge for teaching a specific subject, *command of multiple models of teaching and learning* also is a fundamental element. A good teacher is the one who makes use of various modes of teaching, which will lead to the adoption of “different perspectives of what can be found in traditional teaching (...), so that the students can learn in the most effective way”[6: 125]. Hopkins and Stern [8] include flexibility, the capacity of the teacher to combine the individual work of the student with group work and the skill to resolve unexpected situations in the set of characteristics that determine the quality of teachers.

In the group of attributes that describe teaching work, *reflection, the sharing of experiences and team work* take a prominent place, as they are present in all of the descriptions that are related to quality teaching [5], [9].

It is, of course, in the reflective dynamic and in the school context that the teacher learns to construct and transform his/her professional knowledge, so essential for the good development of his/her pedagogical practice, where group work, sharing experiences and establishing helpful relationships are the most important reference points that promote significant professional moments and motivation for experimentation, for taking decisions and resolving problems of everyday life [10].

Yet, teachers and schools are not isolated nor are they indifferent to the public policies that define and determine their work (the ‘what’ and the ‘how’). Consequently, the quality of the work of teachers

depends upon the individual teacher, the individual school and the particular public policy.

In this case, are the national public policies paying attention to the aims that quality teaching work involves?

When public policies highlight only economic criteria, that are driven by international financial institutions, they can compromise the quality of teaching work and specifically training materials and professional development, which can even trigger tiredness and professional discouragement leading to teachers leaving the profession.

Knowing the public policies, in general, and the educational ones, in particular, establishes a point of departure and a challenge for understanding the feeling(s) that teachers currently have about their work at a time in which social transformations are penetrating deeply into the teaching profession and leaving their mark on professional identity.

Being a teacher: a profession in transformation?

For several years various studies and authors have been referring to the crisis of the teaching profession in part due to the constant social changes that, associated with the complexity of the educational dimension, show that being a teacher involves a range of tasks, functions and different and new roles, which lead to situations of insecurity, disorientation and indisposition. Dubet [11] spoke of the decline of the institution and a feeling of culpability, anxiety, disillusion and fatigue that this occupation of relationship with others carries.

Reflecting about the concepts of *work* and *profession*, even though in a very brief way, it will help to understand the state of constant crisis in which the teaching profession currently *lives*. According to Rodrigues [12: 9], the professions “are a form of organization and work control”. In his turn, Popkewitz [26: 37] adds that when we speak of a *profession*, we explicitly refer to “a highly competent group, specialized, dedicated and well formed, which proclaims a ranking, while granting a social position and (trust) privileges to certain groups”. Rodrigues [12] adds that the teaching profession is part of the professional group of the State, which has - for that reason - as a principal characteristic, the requirements for high levels of qualifications and professionalism. Its activity is performed in interdependence with others occupational groups, which are also considered relatively less prestigious, and it is socially recognized for it is associated with the development of the State by right or for the well-being of the State.

In its turn, the concept of *work* - in the opinion of Neves [13: 20] - has been seen to be constantly going

through changes not only in terms of the “range of content (a means of subsistence and of personal fulfillment and a way of expressing personal identity and participation in the progress of humanity) but also of intensity of significance (an instrumental aim and a peripheral centrality in the life of people, as well as an end in itself and a higher centrality)”. In relation to the tasks, it is recommended that these have variety and demands, which permit learning, allow some autonomy in their execution and that they represent a contribution with meaning and social utility.

However, in the work process the individual is more than a simple hand, he/she also has a heart and a brain. A heart in the sense in which he/she is someone endowed with emotions and feelings; a brain, since he/she is a being that thinks and develops personal strategies for adaptation to the organizational and working context [13]. So, nowadays, will be an easy activity to achieve to organize and control the work of teachers, as a profession?

In all honesty, the teaching profession arose from a political, strategic and scientific-pedagogical evolution, which influenced the representation of the profession by which it could be said that the profession started to take shape from the moment that the State replaced the Church, as the body that came to be in charge of teaching but under standards and the administrative logic of bureaucratic regulations, which have weakened the privileges of a profession [4].

Resulting from this reality, teachers were charged with the task of linking together the traditional remit of the school with the global needs of democratization and development, by participating actively in the solving of social problems and playing diversified roles as educators, psychologists, cultural animators, administrative assistants and politician. These phenomena have resulted in large part from the emergence of schooling for the masses that led to profound alterations in Education, in training and in the teaching profession [14].

In this context, the defense of the autonomy of teachers and the school and of a more defined and professional function was important for stimulating students in different dimensions – reflective, critical, practical and creative – which, associated with constructive logic and facilitators of learning, permitted the substitution of the traditional perspective; namely, the instruction and transmission of knowledge.

For decades, the social representation of the teacher was associated that of a non-specialized technician, who benefitted from long periods of holidays and from a limited work timetable, while occupied with the routine tasks of transmitting knowledge. Most interesting is that these images of the

teaching profession, which have their origin in less positive representations, till prevail in society today.

To this less positive image is added the poor conditions of professional practice, the deterioration of salary levels and social status and the absence of a career perspective, amongst other phenomena that mark out the teaching profession. That is to say, as concluded by Cavaco [15], the teaching profession is difficult to organize and a difficult one in which to work.

The teaching profession presumes also to be an activity subject to great instability and physical and psychic debilitation, thus making it impossible for teachers to achieve all of their professional desires and ambitions [16], since they are often conditioned by factors whose control is out of their reach, as is happening at the present time. Teachers practice their profession in societies that are everyday more open and full of unsteadiness and in schools where they are little ‘informed’, while in the middle of successive reforms. Little wonder they feel that many of their aspirations are inhibited by the reality that they experience inside themselves. They perform their functions involving increasingly more heterogeneous audiences, in which to the indifference of some students is added the hostility of some parents, of the public in general, of the *media* and with an absence of respect from the organs of authority, which all contribute to the loss of prestige of teaching work.

In a general way, teachers feel that the teaching profession is losing prestige regardless of their efforts. They feel that their work is not recognized by the community, in general. They believe that the teacher does not have social status and that all the time it is more difficult to be a teacher with a liking for teaching [17, 18].

Resulting from these reflections, they themselves consider that the profession must anticipate an individual and collective construct of identity framed in affective and ethical dimensions that characterizes the group, the individual, as well as their peers, society and other professional groups that recognize the profession.

Public policies, teacher work and the professional identity of teachers

From 2006 during the mandates of the last two Portuguese constitutional governments (18th. [Socialist] and 19th. [Social Democrat]), policies supported by programs that have been based on guidance from international bodies have been implemented with the clear intention of solving the social and economic problems of the country.

Effectively, in the opinion of Teixeira [19], the leaping from reform to reform in the pursuit of solutions with the eventual conviction that it is possible

to solve problems by the laws and decrees, which are currently faced by the educational system, has not worked, because the schools lack the ability to make the many responses that are needed to overcome the legislative output or the individual capacity for change.

In this context, it is not surprising that the teachers express their concerns, insecurity, distrust and anxiety about the centrally decreed alterations, since they are “confronted with circumstances of change that obliges them to make their work worse, and having to bear with widespread criticism, which - without analyzing these circumstances - considered them as being immediately responsible for the failures of education system” [20: 97].

During the last few years, studies of the accusations and of understanding the teacher uneasiness prevalent in Portuguese schools has emerged in different educational areas, thus arousing the interest of researchers [21], [22], [23], with the common objective of understanding the impact of national policies on teaching work and professional identity. These studies imply the involvement of researchers in educational contexts for the gathering of biographical narratives and life stories of teachers in order to study “the social being, or in other words, society reflected in an individual person that has the particularity of passing through institutions, groups, force fields and struggles” [24: 14].

Stoleroff and Santos [21] - in the study that they carried out - mentioned that the ‘from outside to inside’ policies are happening in contentious processes that result in an intense mobilization of the teachers, due to the fact that the policies challenge their professional identities. The results of this investigation reveal that newer teachers do not rule out the existence of uncertainties but remain ‘loyal’ in order to ensure a place in the profession or make a strategic adaptation that contributes to better working conditions. For the older teachers, “these transformations have ended up by undermining the way they perceive and do their work and their expectation of a secure career, thus they have a need to safeguard their identities and to act on behalf of their professional self-protection and that of others” [21: 14].

On the other hand, the investigation carried out by Herdeiro [22] points out new ways of being a teacher that have been in(tro)duced by educational policies. The rendering of accounts, the control and the pressure are aspects that result from the policies that are intended to achieve - in the short term - statistical results that justify the material and human resources used in the reform proposals adopted without considering the convictions, beliefs and feelings of the professional educators.

The results of the study also mention that the teachers construct their social and professional identity through biographical and relational transactions [25], which identify the school and the policies, as an influential pairing capable of bringing about different and even contradictory feelings. These feelings lead the teachers to make a living but feel professional disillusion and they favor individual dynamics leading to the loneliness of the teachers, as well as an ambition for a professional career that ‘possibly’ will assure them the social recognition that they feel is more and more under threat.

This professional situation transmits a much degraded image of the teacher and of his/her work and it contradicts the image - constructed by teachers throughout the years - of determination, dedication and commitment to the profession.

In this sense, the effects of the latest policies on the image that the teacher has of him/herself and his/her profession leads to a widespread discontent in schools, which interferes in professional relationships and in the ways of viewing and feeling about the profession.

The research carried out by Flores [23], during the last three years, also analyzes the changes that have occurred in the work of schools and teachers and their effect on school life and their everyday professional life. Many of the phenomena studied – the precarious work and the impoverishment of the teachers, the deterioration of teaching conditions and the social image of the teachers, the sources of motivation and encouragement, the tension between the despondency and resignation and the energy and resilience of the teachers – all constitute important premises for our understanding of the feelings and significance that teachers give to their work nowadays

These studies stress the difficulty that teachers have in developing their work in the organizational and professional environments affected by governmental policies, which at times lead to manifestations of attitudes that reveal despondency, disorientation, demotivation, decisions to abandon the profession, freeing themselves from a profession that physically and psychologically wears them down and which disappoints them. It is fundamentally necessary, therefore, to be in the field of studies about teacher identity nowadays to be aware of the reasons and the impact of these decisions on the social and professional identity of teachers.

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