Chapter 1 / Capítulo 1

Teachers under evaluation: the imaginaries of power and fear in Colombian education (English version)
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The wound of teaching / La herida del magisterio

"No signature weighs as heavily as it does on those who live by chalk"
— voice of the teachers' lounge

The seven o'clock bell hasn't rung yet, and the teachers' lounge already smells of reheated coffee. At one end of the long table, someone has left a stack of papers: the annual evaluation form. Next to it, there is a capless highlighter and an awkward silence. No one says anything, yet everyone looks at that stack as if it were a medical report: it can confirm what is already suspected or open a new wound.

Julián —fifteen years in elementary school, two daughters, a partially paid postgraduate degree— walks in, nods with his chin, and sits down. "Again?" he asks, without asking permission from the silence. No one answers; it isn't necessary. Fear here doesn't shout: it organizes the agenda, grades exams at late hours, softens its voice in academic meetings. From the doorway, the coordinator peeks in and smiles with the courtesy of a notary: "Remember to submit on time". Then she leaves. The stack doesn't move. Neither do we.

This scene, which could take place in any school in the country, is more than an awkward moment. It is a symptom. And like any symptom, it calls for context, history, and a name.

When the ground changed

There was a time when the word "statute" sounded like conquest, a custom-made suit for the profession, dignity on paper. Many colleagues still remember Decree 2277 of 1979 as the pillar that upheld a professional identity and a shared career horizon. With the arrival of Decree-Law 1278 of 2002, the ground shifted. It was not just a regulatory update: it was a redefinition of the meaning of being a teacher in the State, of the paths for entry, promotion, and tenure, and of the way power peers into the classroom (Bautista, 2009; Tenorio, 2014).

These transformations did not fall from the sky. They respond to an era in which education is rewritten with the alphabet of efficiency, accountability, and competitiveness, where evaluation becomes a filter, an incentive, and, at times, a punishment (Moretti Tapia, 2022; Cuevas & Rangel, 2019). This is not a phenomenon exclusive to Colombia; it can be recognized across Latin America and beyond (Moretti, 2022; Rodríguez, 2019). Yet each country embodies it in its own way, and here —in our schools, with our children and our stories— it took the shape of a fracture: two statutes, one profession, different expectations, unequal salaries, and a murmur that never fades: *"What if I don't pass this year?"*

The fear that organizes

Foucault (1975) wrote that power does not only repress: it produces realities, rituals, and subjectivities. In the teaching profession, power is felt in spreadsheets, performance rubrics, and scheduled "protocol" meetings. It is not a whip; it is a calendar. It seeps through the cracks of language ("competencies", "goals", "standards") and, quietly, defines what is considered "good teaching" (Popkewitz, 1994). One learns to speak its dialect in order not to be left out.

Bourdieu helps us see that we do not merely obey rules: we embody *habitus*, dispositions that, over time, come to feel natural (Bourdieu, 1994). The teacher who adjusts their class to fit the rubric, who measures creativity by the checkbox, who learns not to take problems "upward" in

order not to cause discomfort, is not less free: they are more cautious. In "liquid" societies, where the solid dissolves and the certain becomes temporary, fear is not an accident: it is the atmosphere (Bauman, 2003).

That fear has pedagogical effects. It turns the teacher into a manager of evidence rather than a weaver of experiences. It focuses them on surviving the evaluation cycle and distracts them from what brought them here: the everyday miracle of learning with others. In our hallways, fear walks hand in hand with hope: there is fear of the principal's signature, and at the same time, trust in the colleague's complicity, in the network, in the union, in the conversation after recess (Covarrubias & Brito, 2007; Sarmiento Pinzón, 2021).

In assemblies, teachers' lounges, and chat groups, the comparison between the statutes —the "old" 2277 and the "new" 1278— has become a literary genre. They are not shopping lists; they are narratives of identity. Those who entered under 1278 learned the craft through a different grammar: competitive exams, probationary periods, periodic evaluations, specialized diploma courses, a more granular career ladder, and promises of meritocracy that coexist with the tightness of time and salary (Bautista, 2009). Those who lived under 2277 do not idealize the past, but they remember a less abrasive fabric, a less fragmented career.

That fracture not only separates generations: it strains teachers' lounges, sustains fragile balances, and sows constant comparison. What on the surface is presented as a difference in career paths, at a deeper level, is felt as a difference in recognition. And recognition —as we know from practice— either nourishes or withers the vocation.

The imaginaries that shape us

Castoriadis (1987) called "imaginary" that magma of meanings that a society creates to give sense to its experiences. In our schools, the imaginary of "merit" coexists with that of "sacrifice", the one of "control" with that of "mission", the "evaluated subject" with the "public intellectual". These imaginaries are not standalone ideas: they become practices, justify decisions, and define silences.

When a teacher says, "here, what matters is the evidence", they are not merely describing: they are legitimizing a form of teaching. When another responds, "what matters is the relationship", they propose a different one. The tension is no smaller; it crosses us and, at times, splits us. Speaking of imaginaries is not a theoretical luxury: it is an act of professional hygiene. It allows us to name the forces that push us —and decide which ones we accept and which we resist (Acosta Moré et al., 2026).

Evaluation can be a mirror that reflects questions or a hammer that shapes through blows. It depends on the design, the use, and, above all, the power relationship that sustains it (Soto, 2013; Tamayo, 2010). In many contexts, performance forms have functioned more as instruments of control than as opportunities for growth. Not because evaluating is bad, but because the way evaluation is carried out conveys a political message: "I observe you to command" or "I accompany you to help you learn".

Vygotsky (1978) would remind us that all development is social before it is individual. An evaluation that isolates the teacher, that does not acknowledge the context, the heterogeneity of the classroom, or the material conditions, misses the point: it confuses measurement with learning. Evaluating teaching without evaluating the ecosystem is like judging a work of art by the color of the curtain.

These imaginaries do not live in the statutes, but in everyday gestures: in the way one greets the principal, in how a form is filled out, in the way a teacher decides to stay silent or speak during faculty meetings. Each practice, each silence, each word repeated naturally reveals a way of understanding the teaching profession. As Bourdieu (1994) wisely noted, the symbolic carries the force of law when it manages to present itself as "the normal". The danger is not obeying an unjust rule, but believing it is the only possible one.

Speaking of imaginaries is not a theoretical luxury, but an act of professional hygiene. It allows us to clear our vision, recognize which forces push us, and, above all, decide which ones we accept and which we resist. Without that awareness, the teacher repeats others' discourses believing them to be their own. That is why, as Freire (1997) emphasizes, education begins with the awareness of one's own history: "*No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves alone; people educate each other, mediated by the world*". What changes the teacher's world is not a statute, but their way of understanding their place within it.

Among the most persistent imaginaries in the Colombian educational system is the imaginary of control: the belief that valuable teaching must be measured, supervised, and validated from the outside. This idea, which seems natural, stems from a deeper political rationality. Foucault (1975/2008) showed how modern power disguises itself as management: surveillance becomes accompaniment, control masquerades as guidance, and the teacher ends up self-monitoring in the name of "quality".

Tamayo (2010) reported this clearly: teacher evaluation in Colombia not only measures performance, but also shapes subjectivities. The teacher internalizes the gaze of the State, they observe themselves through others' eyes. They feel indebted. That discreet fear, that learned prudence, becomes habitus. In this way, power no longer needs coercion: the teacher self-regulates in advance, seeking not to be singled out.

In response to that imaginary, resistance begins with an intimate gesture: returning to trust in one's own pedagogical judgment. In remembering that teaching is not about executing instructions, but about interpreting realities. That teacher autonomy is not a privilege, but an ethical responsibility. Hope, then, does not oppose control by negation, but by creation: it invents alternative ways to legitimize pedagogical work from the community, through dialogue, and through shared practice.

Another persistent figure in the teaching imaginary is that of sacrifice. In accounts of the teaching profession —in conferences, talks, the press, hallways— the teacher appears as a martyr of the system: the one who stays up late, the one who pays for their own materials, the one who "endures because they love it". This narrative, although it seems laudatory, is also a trap. As Mejía (2011) states, "*the mystique of sacrifice masks the precarization of teaching labor under the cover of dedication*".

Vocation, when confused with sacrifice, loses its emancipatory power. Love for teaching cannot be an excuse to tolerate institutional mistreatment or social indifference. The ethics of care —so present in the Latin American tradition (Covarrubias & Brito, 2007)— demands caring also for the caregiver. The teacher who neglects themselves in the name of others ends up emptied of meaning.

That is why, as Freire (1997) proposes, educational commitment must be dialogical: caring for others without neglecting oneself, serving without losing oneself. The pedagogy of hope does not exalt sacrifice, but transforms it into critical solidarity: the act of resisting with awareness, not with resignation.

Colombian educational policy strongly established the imaginary of merit as a moral criterion and organizing principle of the system (Tenorio, 2014; Bautista, 2009). Seemingly, it is a fair principle: everyone advances according to their effort. But, like any hegemonic narrative, merit conceals structural inequalities.

The rural teacher without access to postgraduate education competes with the urban teacher who has a university nearby; the young teacher without time or resources is measured against one who has any institutional support. In theory, all are equal; in practice, the conditions are radically different. And when merit becomes the sole criterion, injustice is cloaked in legality.

Bourdieu (1994) warned that meritocracy does not eliminate inequality: it reproduces it with symbolic legitimacy. The teacher who "does not advance" not only remains stuck in the hierarchy, but is also marked by an invisible guilt: the guilt of not having "known how to take advantage of opportunities". The outcome is doubly perverse: precarity becomes naturalized, and solidarity is dismantled.

Merit, when it does not recognize context, ceases to be a compass and becomes a boundary. Reimagining it requires restoring its collective dimension: acknowledging the merit of the team, of the community, of shared effort. Because teaching, as Vygotsky (1978) reminded us, is always a social act: it is built with others, not against them.

Imaginaries are not fixed. They transform with generations, with contexts, with struggles. Every new teacher inherits narratives —about merit, sacrifice, vocation, control—, but also rewrites them from their own experience. That silent rewriting is itself a form of symbolic emancipation.

Sarmiento Pinzón (2021) holds that professional dignity begins when teachers take on authorship of their own stories. To speak about oneself, to write about one's experience, to systematize one's practice is not academic vanity: it is a political act. Popkewitz (1994) confirmed this from another perspective: pedagogy is also the production of discourse, and whoever controls the discourse controls meaning.

To reclaim the word —to say "this is my story, this is my work, this is my knowledge"— is to begin instituting a new imaginary of the teaching profession. One in which the teacher is not evaluated but listened to; not monitored but accompanied; not managed but recognized as a public intellectual and an agent of transformation.

A story can also be read in our salary scales: that about the value of study time, accumulated experience, and the daily responsibility of teaching. The promise of Decree 1278, of "the higher the qualification, the greater the compensation" encounters well-known limits in reality: expensive postgraduate programs, unequal academic offering, slow administrative procedures, and intermittent calls for promotion (Bautista, 2009; FECODE, 2022).

The message a teacher receives when the career takes too long to acknowledge their effort is not an accounting one: it is moral. The morale of the profession, when eroded, cannot be restored through a motivation workshop. It is rebuilt through justice, coherence, and truthful words.

Freire (1998) reminded us that "*education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage*". A teacher who demands dignity is not asking for privileges: he is asking for the conditions to keep loving their profession without having to sacrifice themselves for it.

The school as a field of forces

The sociology of the field teaches us that within the school, various forms of capital —symbolic, cultural, bureaucratic, and social— intersect, and that each actor's position is contested through concrete practices (Bourdieu, 1994). No action is innocent. The principal who interprets a regulation one way or another, the administration that sets a schedule, the union that calls for action, the teacher who chooses to speak or remain silent, the family that supports or pressures, all move their pieces. The school is not a "place" in any static sense; it is a field of living forces, a board of relationships where meanings are negotiated, hierarchies are constructed, and forms of power are contested.

That field is crossed by visible and invisible tensions. The visible tensions are regulations, statements, reforms, official discourse. The invisible: affections, silences, loyalties, fears. In that fabric —a blend of structure and desire— much of school life is defined. Foucault (1975) would put it bluntly: power is not imposed from above, it circulates. It seeps into gestures, into documents, into hallways, into the voice that adjusts itself when speaking before a principal. That is why the classroom is not outside politics; it is a daily way of practicing it.

The school field has its own symbolic economy. There are capitals that circulate and determine who has legitimacy to speak: academic qualification, experience, seniority, eloquence, closeness to the principal, the reputation of being "efficient". But there are also alternative capitals, less recognized yet more powerful: empathy, the capacity to listen, the moral authority that emanates from example. The teacher who earns the respect of their students and colleagues accumulates a form of symbolic capital that no decree can grant or take away.

Sarmiento Pinzón (2021) noted that a teacher's professional dignity is played out precisely in this symbolic dimension: not in indicators, but in the recognition of the other. Where the system installs bureaucratic hierarchies, the teacher reconstructs ethical hierarchies. Where policy privileges evidence, the teacher restores experience. And in that daily practice, the instituting power of the profession is revealed: the capacity to redefine the meaning of school from within.

In that field, the State enters in multiple forms: forms, directives, visits, budgets, guidelines. At times with promises of reform that seek to "modernize" the profession; at times with adjustments that, under the language of quality, impose macroeconomic tensions upon the classroom (Tenorio, 2014). It is not conspiracy: it is structure. And structure, if unnamed, becomes naturalized.

Freire (1997) insisted that the most serious aspect of oppression is not control, but its internalization: when the oppressed begin to think with the voice of the oppressor. In the school, this happens when the teacher accepts as unquestionable the discourses that subordinate them. When they repeat, without critique, that "everything is a matter of management", or that "vocation is proven by enduring", they are surrendering the field of meaning. To name the structure is, therefore, the first act of freedom.

Castoriadis (1987) would say that every institution rests on a social imaginary: a set of meanings that present themselves as natural, even though they are historical constructions. The school, as a modern institution, has been designed to reproduce an order —that of the nation-state, the market, the norm—, yet within that very structure lies the possibility of creating other orders. Therein lies its paradox: it is a space of reproduction and invention at the same time.

Popkewitz (1994) complements this view by asserting that educational reforms are also technologies of governance. Under the discourse of innovation and quality, mechanisms of

surveillance, self-assessment, and ranking are introduced with the aim of shaping "modern", "efficient", and "productive" subjectivities. But, as Popkewitz himself warns, the teacher is not a passive recipient of these policies: they interpret, adapt, and subvert them. It is in this mediation that the key to their agency lies.

The union, for example, represents one of the most visible forces in the field. Its discourse contests the meaning of policies, questions the legitimacy of reforms, and reminds us of the collective dimension of educational work. Covarrubias and Brito (2007) emphasize that Latin American teacher unionism has also been a pedagogical movement: a pedagogy of resistance that teaches citizenship, solidarity, and memory. The defense of labor rights is, ultimately, the defense of the right to teach with dignity.

The family, another actor in the field, brings its own moral and emotional capital. Its expectations can be either encouragement or pressure. In underprivileged communities, the school is often the only space where the State becomes visible; the teacher, its only human face. This symbolic burden amplifies their responsibility, but also their transformative power.

Bautista (2009) noted that, with the introduction of Decree 1278, an attempt was made to rationalize the educational field under the logic of competition. This "modernization" transferred to the school tensions that previously belonged to the economy: productivity, efficiency, performance. But the classroom, unlike the factory, does not produce objects but relationships. When measured with market tools, the outcome is not quality, but dehumanization.

That is why the school is a field of forces, but also of contested meanings. Every actor, in speaking, acts; in deciding, institutes. There is no neutrality. In every pedagogical meeting, in every council, in every informal conversation, a model of education, a vision of power, and an idea of humanity are being defined. The political does not take place only in the ministry; it also occurs in the teachers' lounge.

Patiño Niño (2019), interpreting Rancière (2003), points out that the emancipatory teacher does not carry out their role from a position of superiority; on the contrary, it is from the recognition of the equality of intelligences. Their task is neither to transmit knowledge nor to dominate wills, but to "make the intelligences of the students relate directly to the intelligence of the common thing" (p. 355), thus acting as a mediator in a process of emancipation that frees without imposing. In this sense, the teacher's power does not lie in the authority they hold, but in their ability to awaken in others the awareness of their own potential.

The school, in short, is a field of tensions where each individual acts, suffers, and creates. There, the language of control confronts that of commitment, that of fear confronts that of hope, that of the norm confronts that of desire. In this daily conflict, the soul of the teaching profession is defined.

To name that field, to recognize its forces, to analyze its dynamics, is a way of reclaiming the teacher's symbolic autonomy. For if power circulates —as Foucault taught—, so too does freedom. And in the school, that freedom begins the moment a teacher dares to say: "This is my field too, and here my voice matters".

Dignity as public policy

Talking about dignity is not poetry: it is public policy. The Constitution established education as a right and a service that the State must guarantee with quality; this includes recognizing the teacher as a professional with high responsibility, not merely as a spreadsheet executor (Political Constitution

of Colombia, 1991). Any serious reform of the teaching career must take into account the ecosystem of teachers' work: actual time allocation, relevant professional development, participation in decision-making, material conditions, and symbolic recognition (MEN, 2002; Sarmiento Pinzón, 2021).

In this context, union activity is not noise: it is organized citizenship. When the union debates statutes, it is not only discussing salaries: it is discussing the purpose of the school, the meaning of the classroom, and the republican promise we uphold every morning (Covarrubias & Brito, 2007).

Despite the rubrics, the deadlines, the stack of papers in the staff room, there is something the paperwork cannot capture: the moment that unfolds when a child, after many attempts, finally understands. That spark in their eyes does not appear in the indicators, yet it is what keeps us going. Call it vocation, connection, an ethic of care. It is what allows us to remember that we teach people, not metrics.

That is why this book does not seek to feed nostalgia or to burn manuals. It aims to open an honest conversation with those who live by chalk and by the word: What imaginaries sustain us and which ones sink us? What kind of evaluation do we want, and for what purpose? What statute do we need to be better teachers without turning into form-filling operators?

Close in order to open

The bell finally rings. The room breathes again. Someone grabs the stack, hands out the forms, and the conversations resume, now with a practical tone: "Do you have indicator three at hand?" School life —wise, stubborn— goes on. As we walk back to the classroom, it is legitimate to feel the wound; it is also urgent to think about how to heal it.

Perhaps the first step is simple and radical: to listen to one another again. To name what hurts, to remember what makes us proud, and to decide, together, what kind of school we want to sustain. It is there, in that weaving, where fear loses organization and hope gains method (Castoriadis, 1987; Popkewitz, 1994).

A question that continues to echo:

What if, instead of being taught how to "get through" the evaluation, we built an evaluation that helps us teach better?