Chapter 2 / Capítulo 2

Teachers under evaluation: the imaginaries of power and fear in Colombian education (English version)
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Fear as policy / El miedo como política

"Fear is not in the law; it lies in the silence it leaves behind."
— Anonymous teacher from Boyacá

The day of the evaluation begins long before the day of the evaluation. It begins when the institutional email announces the visit, when the hallways fill with whispers and teachers, without saying so, change their tone of voice. On that day, classrooms don't smell like marker ink but like control. Everyone reviews the forms, updates folders, fixes verbs. "Just in case", someone says. There is no visible enemy, yet you can feel the pulse of diffuse surveillance. Foucault (1975/2008) explained that modern power does not need whips: it only needs to make people believe someone is watching. The panopticon is no longer a tower; it is a culture. In schools, the panopticon wears civilian clothes and goes by the name of protocol.

The pedagogy of control

In every classroom, next to the blackboard, hangs a clock. In the offices, an Excel sheet. In ministerial discourse, the word "quality". Between the three, a pedagogy is built that does not teach mathematics or literature, but obedience. It is a pedagogy that does not appear in curricula, yet organizes school life. It has no dedicated subject, yet permeates every class. It teaches without words, corrects without punishment, models without debate. This is the pedagogy of control.

In it, time is the first watchman. Every minute accounted for, every report submitted, every rubric completed creates a sense of precision that reassures the administration, even as it worries the teacher. The classroom ceases to be a space for exploration and becomes a stage for verification. "Complying" becomes both a pedagogical verb and a moral measure: those who comply are good teachers, those who improvise are suspect.

Control has become an everyday grammar: observation sheets, performance rubrics, classroom visits, indicators, and goals that colonize the teacher's language. As Popkewitz (1994) warns, educational reform does not merely change structures; it regulates ways of thinking. It defines what is reasonable, what is desirable, what is legitimate. Within this framework, the teacher is no longer measured by their ability to inspire, but by their ability to document their inspiration.

Forms, more than tools, become signs of obedience. Bourdieu (1994) would explain that the symbolic power of control lies precisely in its apparent neutrality: everyone accepts it because it seems logical, inevitable, technical. But behind every Excel sheet hides an ideology: that of efficiency over relationship, of product over process, of number over word.

Power, following Foucault (1975), does not operate only from above: it circulates. It takes hold in every signed cell, in every completed form, in every preventive fear. It does not require coercion, because it seeps into subjectivity. That is why repealing a rule is not enough: one must also examine the structure of feelings it leaves behind. The tragic thing is not that the teacher fears the decree, but that they end up justifying it, repeating its logic, unintentionally becoming its executor.

In institutional meetings, administrators repeat that "evaluation is meant to improve". Yet between the lines, it is understood that anyone who fails to score sixty points risks losing everything. The boundary between support and threat becomes blurred. On the surface, these are technical processes; at their core, they are rituals that legitimize fear. As Tamayo (2010) rightly noted, teacher

evaluation in Colombia was shaped more as a device of labor control than as a formative strategy. Its design emphasizes sanction over understanding.

It is therefore not surprising that many teachers associate the word "evaluation" with "dismissal" rather than with "learning". This association is not the result of paranoia, but of accumulated experience. In multiple contexts, evaluation has not been a space for growth, but a stage for exclusion. Meritocratic discourse —which promised to recognize effort and professionalize teaching (MEN, 2002)— ended up functioning as a symbolic boundary between the "capable" and the "deficient".

In the pedagogy of control, emotions are also managed. Fear is planned. There is no need to impose punishments when simply creating the expectation of error is enough. The teacher learns to speak cautiously, to write carefully, to correct without questioning. Fear becomes part of the hidden curriculum.

Bourdieu (1994) would have called it a *defensive habitus*: an internalized disposition that shapes behavior. New teachers learn from the veterans the art of surviving surveillance: "don't say that in public", "don't speak too much", "keep copies of everything". These are lessons in caution that end up replacing lessons in reflection. In the name of stability, one gives up their voice.

But control does not only inhibit; it also produces subjectivity. Foucault explained this clearly: power does not merely forbid, it also creates. It produces ways of speaking, of seeing oneself, of feeling. In the case of the teacher, it produces the figure of the teacher-manager: one who plans, evaluates, files, manages, but barely has time to think. The system rewards them for being organized, not for being creative; for complying, not for imagining.

And yet, within that machinery, the teacher remains an agent. There are cracks, fissures, margins. In every interstitial space —the recess, the hallway chat, the improvised lesson— an alternative pedagogy can emerge, a pedagogy of conversation and meaning. As Freire (1997) reminds us, "education is an act of freedom; there is no neutral education". Teaching, even within control, can be a form of emancipation if the teacher retains the ability to say "no" to the mechanization of their practice.

Tenorio (2014) warns that contemporary educational policies, by adopting the language of total quality, transfer market logics to the school: competitiveness, continuous evaluation, flexibility. But the classroom is not a business, and the teacher is not human capital. Much of the wear and tear of the profession lies in this semantic confusion. When schools adopt categories of business management, they lose their humanistic purpose.

In Castoriadis's (1987) terms, pedagogical control is part of the instituted imaginary of modernity: a way of ensuring that order is reproduced. But every society, he argued, also contains the possibility of a instituting imaginary: a creative force capable of breaking with the established. That force, in schools, is the teachers who decide to think for themselves, who dare to transform routine into reflection, obedience into inquiry, forms into conversation.

The challenge is not to eliminate control —impossible, and perhaps undesirable— but to humanize it: to turn it into support, into dialogue, into shared learning. The kind of control that educates is not the one that surveils, but the one that guides. The one that measures in order to understand, not in order to punish.

That is why every time a teacher turns an observation into a conversation, a report into self-reflection, an indicator into a question, they are exercising resistance. A subtle, everyday resistance, yet profoundly political. Because the pedagogy of control can only be dismantled by another pedagogy: one of meaning, of relationship, of language that becomes human again.

The power of the gaze

No one teaches the same when they know they are being watched. The body gives it away: the voice becomes modulated, gestures are controlled, spontaneity falls asleep. Students perceive it; they sense the tension; observers know it as well; they measure what they themselves have set in motion. In his analysis of power, Foucault (1975/2008) insisted that visibility is a trap: one performs for the eye that watches, not for the meaning one seeks to teach.

Thus, classroom observation becomes a theater of correction. The teacher stops being a free actor and turns into a functionary of the form. Castoriadis (1987) would explain that this system creates an imaginary: that of the "model teacher", an almost technical figure, aligned with protocol, without cracks or doubt. But education —the real kind, the one that bleeds and laughs— is impossible without contradictions.

The fear of "not measuring up" produces its own aesthetic: spotless classrooms, meticulous folders, polished speeches. Yet a pedagogy measured in decimals does not reach to measure tenderness, nor patience, nor the ingenuity that emerges in improvisation. What does not fit in the form does not exist for the State.

There is a kind of fear that does not appear on paper, yet paper produces it: the fear of speaking. In academic meetings, many choose silence over dissent. It is not cowardice; it is an instinct for self-preservation. According to Bauman (2003), in liquid modernity, job insecurity becomes a form of governance: each person watches themselves to avoid being discarded. In school, the body is the first territory of control: the schedule, attendance, the signature, clothing, emotional disposition. And yet, that same body —with its fatigue and its laughter— remains a site of resistance. When a teacher sings, improvises, embraces, or laughs, they break the logic of fear for a moment. In that small gesture pulses the deepest kind of disobedience: the choice to remain human.

Resisting does not always look like resistance

Not every act of resistance is epic. Some fit inside a gesture: writing a personal note on an evaluation, holding a reading circle during recess, refusing to lose empathy, holding someone's gaze when everything urges you to lower yours. In Bourdieu's (1994) terms, these are micro-actions within the field, small symbolic struggles that seek to preserve meaning in the face of the machinery of normalization. They are almost invisible acts, yet deeply political: they do not aim to overthrow structures, but to prevent the soul from falling asleep.

Covarrubias and Brito (2007) remind us that a teacher's social commitment is not measured by obedience, but by ethical coherence. In bureaucratic contexts, resistance is not always opposition; sometimes it is care, accompanying, keeping alive the pedagogical conversation that policy tries to standardize. The ethics of care becomes, in this sense, a form of subversion: caring for language, caring for childhood, caring for hope. In a world that measures everything, caring for what cannot be measured is itself an act of resistance.

Freire (1997) called this attitude "radical hope": the conviction that transformation is possible without violence, that tenderness can be a political strategy. Teacher resistance, in its deepest sense, is not a rejection of the system, but a reinvention of what is possible. The teacher who

continues to teach with love amid disillusionment is not evading conflict; they are confronting it through another language.

Foucault (1975) had anticipated this: resistance is not outside power, but within it, in the interstices of its exercise. In schools, these cracks are the spaces where teachers choose to read differently, speak differently, alter the rhythms, laugh when silence is expected. These are the small leaks of control, the micropolitics of freedom.

Tamayo (2010) noted that teacher evaluation in Colombia was conceived more as a regulatory device than as an opportunity for growth. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely these same devices that open up the possibility of rethinking the system. Each feedback meeting can become a space for conversation, each rubric an excuse to talk about what does not fit into the charts: relationships, emotion, history. In critical hands, the instrument of control can be transformed into a tool for reflection.

Bauman (2003) argued that in liquid modernity, power is exercised by dissolving bonds, fragmenting communities, and producing insecure individuals who blame themselves. In this context, resistance means rebuilding community: talking with colleagues, sharing materials, sustaining mutual trust. In times of competition, collaboration becomes revolutionary.

Vygotsky (1978) would remind us that all development is social before it is individual. If learning is mediated, professional growth is too. Evaluating a teacher without a community is a contradiction. Institutional isolation does not foster improvement: it produces alienation. Real improvement arises from peer conversation, the exchange of experiences, and trust in others.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010) argues that modern institutions operate under a "northern epistemology" that renders local knowledge invisible. In this sense, resistance also means defending the pedagogical knowledge of the Global South: community-based practices, intuitive strategies, wisdom built from experience. When a teacher recognizes their own knowledge, they challenge the epistemological monopoly of technical discourse.

Tenorio (2014) warns that contemporary education policy talks about "modernization" but acts as a technification of teaching. In this context, resistance means rehumanizing language: replacing "product" with "process", "performance" with "presence", "quality" with "care". Every word rescued from the technocratic vocabulary restores education to its human dimension.

Apple (1986) and Giroux (1997) argued that teachers are transformative intellectuals: individuals who act at the heart of culture, contesting meanings and expanding horizons. From this perspective, resistance is the exercise of critical thinking within everyday practice. The classroom, more than a space for transmission, becomes a laboratory of emancipation.

And yet, not all resistance is visible. Some is woven in silence: a teacher who chooses to listen before punishing, a teacher who teaches poetry amid protocol, a group that meets to read Freire when the schedule forbids it. These are small but persistent acts that keep the human pulse of the school alive.

As Castoriadis (1987) points out, only a new imaginary can break the cycle of instituted power. An imaginary in which power is not rooted in fear, but in trust. To imagine such a school is not naivety; it is necessity. A school where evaluation is experienced as dialogue, not as threat. Where mistakes are seeds for learning, not sentences. Where the teacher, instead of fearing being observed, feels

supported in their process.

Public policy needs to return to the classroom, not to police it, but to listen to it. The Ministry of National Education (2002) stated that Decree 1278 sought to professionalize teachers; yet professionalization cannot be mistaken for bureaucratization. To professionalize is to recognize pedagogical knowledge as complex knowledge, not to reduce it to a checklist of competencies.

Resistance does not always look like resistance, yet it is. To resist is to refuse cynicism, to not let routine extinguish vocation, to not allow distrust to erase meaning. Every time a teacher keeps teaching with hope, even in the midst of uncertainty, the system cracks open just a little.

Freire (1998) said it best: "hope is not a passive stance; it is a vital choice for life". And in the classroom, each day, that choice is made again.

Chapter closing

Night falls over the school. Empty hallways hold the echoes of a day in which no one raised their voice, yet everyone thought the same thing. On the bulletin board, the evaluation schedule remains posted: blue tones, cold letters. As she leaves, a teacher switches off the classroom lights and whispers, "We'll continue tomorrow". She doesn't know that, with that simple phrase, she has just declared her resistance.

Because to continue —to teach despite fear, to think despite the norm, to care despite the protocol— is, in these times, the most noble political act a teacher can make.