

Chapter 5 / Capítulo 5

Teachers under evaluation: the imaginaries of power and fear in Colombian education (English version)
ISBN: 978-9915-9680-5-6
DOI: 10.62486/978-9915-9680-5-6.ch05

©2025 The authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) 4.0 License.

Education, power, and dignity / Educación, poder y dignidad

“Power is not possessed; it is exercised. But it is also resisted.”

— Michel Foucault

“Dignity is not granted; it is upheld.” — Voice of a teacher in assembly

Education as a territory of power

Education is a mirror in which the structure of power is reflected. In every classroom, every public policy, every improvement plan, we see the struggle between what the State wants the school to become and what teachers strive for it to remain.

Foucault (1975/2008) taught that power does not operate only through institutions, but through bodies, gestures, and habits. In the Colombian teaching profession, that power is expressed through normalization: evaluations, rubrics, guidelines, training programs, and discourses that appear neutral but seek to govern teachers' subjectivity. The teacher, then, not only teaches: they are also taught to be a certain kind of subject.

But power, as Foucault argued, always coexists with its reverse: resistance. Every teacher who chooses to open a space for dialogue instead of applying a rubric, every time a collective of educators creates its own materials instead of following the official guide, is exercising a form of pedagogical counter-government. In that small gesture lies a deeper truth: power rests on obedience, and dignity rests on awareness.

Bourdieu (1994) would call this *a field of forces*: a space where symbolic capital is contested and where it is determined who gets to speak, who defines knowledge, who classifies what matters. The Colombian educational field—marked by political, economic, and cultural tensions—is the stage for a struggle over the very meaning of teaching. In the midst of that tension, the teacher becomes a political subject, even when they do not intend to.

The school and the dignity of the profession

In times when everything is measured, defending the dignity of teaching is almost an act of insurgency. Dignity is not empty pride; it is the conviction that educational work holds intrinsic value, prior to any indicator.

Arias Ruiz et al. (2012) argue that reflection on dignity and the role of teachers must be approached from multiple theoretical perspectives. Among these, they highlight philosophical ideas that have accompanied the evolution of concepts such as school and education, articulated with the models of the Active School and the Emerging Pedagogies of the 20th and 21st centuries. Within this framework, notions such as humanization, dignification, critical thinking, local knowledge, and recognition become central to understanding the formative and ethical meaning of teaching.

Freire (1997) said that teaching is an act of love, but also of courage. Love, because it trusts in the capacity of the other; courage, because it persists even when the system distrusts. Dignity, then, is not an inheritance: it is a daily practice. It is sustained when teachers refuse to be a mere executor of policies and instead assume themselves as public intellectuals: subjects who interpret the world in order to transform it.

Covarrubias and Brito (2007) remind us that the social commitment of the Latin American teacher is not limited to teaching content, but to keeping society's critical consciousness alive. The dignity of the teacher resides at that threshold between the classroom and the street: in the ability to read the context, to question the norm, and to continue believing that education is a form of emancipation, not domestication.

The power of naming: policies, discourses and control

The words used to label education are never innocent. "Quality", "efficiency", "accountability", "competencies"... each term carries a worldview. Popkewitz (1994) warned that modern educational reforms are not only meant to improve teaching, but to produce subjects who embody the values of the economic system. In this way, technical discourse becomes a moral policy: the "efficient" teacher, the "competent" student, the "productive" school.

Tenorio (2014) notes that Colombian educational policy adopted this global language without adapting it to the local context, creating a gap between the rhetoric of progress and the reality of the classroom. In this context, the teacher's words—their stories, metaphors, and denunciations—become an act of resistance. Naming things differently is breaking the spell of the official discourse.

Castoriadis (1987) argued that societies only change when they create new imaginary significations. In schools, this means reclaiming the right to say what it means to teach, what it means to learn, what is success, and what is failure. Naming from the teaching experience is to restore the symbolic sovereignty of the profession.

Tamayo (2010) observed that in Colombia, teacher evaluation not only measures performance but also defines professional identity. To resist is not to reject evaluation, but to contest its meaning: to shift from an exam that monitors to a dialogue that guides. When the teacher evaluates in order to grow rather than to fear, power changes hands.

Between control and freedom: the teaching body as a frontier

The teacher's body—their voice, gesture, presence—is the first territory where educational politics play out. It is there that mandates of efficiency, the pressures of time, fatigue, and emotion are inscribed. Foucault (1975/2008) spoke of the *docile body*: one trained by the system to obey. Yet in schools, the teaching body can also become a rebellious body: one that turns routine into ritual, surveillance into presence, rules into closeness.

Bauman (2003) understood this on another plane: we live in a liquid modernity, where bonds are fragile and individuals are replaceable. In this context, teaching represents a luminous anachronism: a steadfast commitment, a wager on the other. While the market demands flexibility, the teacher offers constancy. And that constancy—that fidelity to the human—is a form of ethical resistance.

The school, in its everyday life, is a frontier between control and freedom. There, spreadsheets coexist with poetry, rules with affection. Each pedagogical decision is a small act of autonomy against a system that seeks homogenization. That is why dignity is not defended in discourse, but in practice: in every class where one chooses to listen rather than impose, in every project where thinking is preferred over mere compliance.

Dignity, memory, and future

The Colombian teaching profession has been a historical actor of memory. From the strikes of the twentieth century to contemporary struggles against precarization, teachers have turned their own biographies into a pedagogy of resistance. Bautista (2009) captures it precisely: "the Colombian

teacher has learned to resist with chalk and word”. This resistance is not only union-based; it is cultural.

Mejía (2011) emphasizes that Latin American pedagogical resistance is also an aesthetics of hope: a way of imagining and narrating the world from the classroom. In that narrative, dignity is not reduced to a claim, but becomes a civilizational project: a commitment to humanity in times of dehumanization.

Freire (1997) insisted that hope is a historical duty. It is not about waiting for change, but producing it. Each generation of teachers inherits a debt from the previous one: to keep alive the possibility of believing in education. That legacy is not stored in archives, but in gestures: the way we greet, the way we listen, the way we teach.

Teacher dignity, then, is neither nostalgia nor slogan. It is living memory. And like all living memory, it projects itself into the future. Wherever a teacher says “we’ll continue tomorrow”, the history of education breathes again.

The school that dignifies

Perhaps the greatest act of power is to keep believing in dignity when the world around denies it. Every classroom that opens is a silent manifesto against disillusionment. Every teacher who teaches with meaning is writing a form of country that does not yet exist.

Castoriadis (1987) would remind us that every social creation is born from a radical imagination. And it is precisely that imagination that education protects: the possibility of inventing worlds.

That is why the power the system fears most is not political or union power, but pedagogical power: the teacher’s ability to awaken consciousness, to plant questions, to teach how to think. It is on that power that dignity is founded.

Because in the end, teaching is not the transmission of knowledge; it is reminding the other that they can be free. And that reminder —day after day, generation after generation— is the deepest and most silent form of resistance.