

Chapter 3 / Capítulo 3

Teachers under evaluation: the imaginaries of power and fear in Colombian education (English version)
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The teacher's imagination / Los imaginarios del maestro

"Society is instituted by creating meanings that make it exist; without those shared images, there is no common world".

- Castoriadis, 1987

Evening settles over the teachers' lounge and, as always, the coffee tastes just a bit like urgency. Two teachers speak in low voices. "What does it mean to be a good teacher?" she asks, looking at the bulletin board filled with courses, summons, and deadlines. "The one who gets results", he replies, quickly, almost automatically. She smiles: "Results... for whom? The student, the principal, the ministry?" At the next table, someone adds: "A good teacher is the one who doesn't give up". Another voice, farther away: "The one who doesn't yell". No one writes any of it down, yet everyone keeps it. What seems like a hallway conversation is, in fact, an intimate assembly on the meaning of the craft: a map of images that, without us noticing, guide us. That is what we call imaginaries: the shared meanings that shape what we value and what we fear (Castoriadis, 1987).

There are phrases that become institutional legends: "With vocation, anything is possible", "Merit is always recognized", "Quality is measurable", "A good teacher leaves a mark". None of them are harmless. Each lays a brick in professional identity, shapes expectations, and sanctions behaviors. Bourdieu would say that these beliefs, repeated and legitimized, settle into habitus: dispositions we perceive as "natural" because we have lived them over and over (Bourdieu, 1994). Thus, amid competitions, rubrics, and heroic narratives, we gradually learn what to expect from ourselves and from others.

In this chapter, we pause to listen to that voices that inhabit us: the imaginary of merit, vocation as destiny, social recognition as a horizon, and teacher identity as a contested territory. Not to judge them from the outside, but to interrogate them from within: What do they allow us to see? What do they prevent us from creating? How do they intertwine with policies and with the concrete life of the classroom?

Scene in the teachers' lounge: "That thing we call being a good teacher"

The conversation continues as the sun slips through the blinds. "To be a good teacher is when your students want to come back to class", someone says, and the words leave a warmth in the air. Another colleague, more pragmatic, hesitates: "But if they don't improve on the tests, what's the point?" The echo of standardized assessment resurfaces, precise, like a metronome marking the pace of the times. What is being discussed is not just what or how we teach, but who holds the authority to say what it means to teach well: the child's gaze, the indicators, the principal, the community, or the State?

Ricoeur (1996) argues that we tell ourselves stories to know who we are; narrative identity is not a fixed mirror, but a story in motion. In education, each school invents its own repertoire of heroes and villains: the "innovative" teacher, the "traditional" one, the "test champion", the "poet of the classroom", the "unionist", the "technologist", the "lab coat teacher", the "chalk teacher". These characters do not appear in manuals: they live in whispers, in silent recognitions, in hallway conversations, in anecdotes repeated with a tone of respect or irony.

Like any narrative, these categories assign meanings and hierarchies: some are quoted in meetings, others are viewed with suspicion; some are invited to pilot programs, others are merely tolerated.

Bourdieu (1994) would explain it clearly: the school is a symbolic field, a stage where various forms of capital —cultural, social, moral— circulate, and where each gesture, each word, each evaluation result reshapes positions. In this space, being a “good teacher” is not only a pedagogical matter: it is a moral and political status.

However, the “good teacher” is not a universal category, but a situated narrative. Bruner (1991) reminded us that the human mind thinks in narrative formats before logical matrices. What we believe about the “good teacher” does not come from a decree, but from shared stories: the teacher who changed the trajectory of a restless student, the colleague who “pulled off” the science fair, the tutor who lost sleep over a “difficult” group. In these micro-stories, merit, vocation, and recognition take shape. Naming them, looking at them slowly, is the first gesture of freedom.

Dubet (2006) would say that teaching is a moral experience: a profession that requires creating meaning amid contradictory tensions. The teacher must educate within a system that often contradicts what it teaches. Their “good practice” depends not only on techniques, but on permanent ethical decisions: when to intervene, when to stay silent, when to care, when to confront. It is within this web of choices that the ethics of the profession is born.

Larrosa (2003), for his part, would express it with a gentler image: being a teacher is an experience of word and presence. It is not about “making others learn”, but about being with someone in a way that allows them to think. In this definition, the good teacher is not the one who masters content, but the one who creates experience, the one who leaves a mark.

At the same time, Freire (1998) would add that there is no true teaching without love, but also none without courage. The “good” teacher is not the one who pleases, but the one who dares to speak the truth with tenderness. Being a good teacher, in his pedagogy, means teaching with hope, resisting the temptation of cynicism. In a context where bureaucracy colonizes language, hope becomes an act of resistance.

Honneth (1997) would speak here of recognition: the vital need to be seen, valued, and heard. The school, as a social microcosm, can grant or deny that recognition. When a teacher feels reduced to a number, they lose more than motivation: they lose identity. But when they find an environment where their voice matters—even if only among colleagues— they regain their moral strength.

Similarly, Sarmiento Pinzón (2021) translates this to the Colombian context: professional dignity begins with the teacher's self-recognition. No reform is possible if the teacher does not see themselves as a bearer of legitimate knowledge. In this line, Covarrubias and Brito (2007) propose a pedagogy of coherence: teaching is not about reproducing rules, but about embodying values.

Castoriadis (1987) would remind us that every society is instituted through imaginaries: meanings that organize reality. In schools, the imaginary of the “good teacher” can be a device of power —when it determines who belongs and who does not—or an instituting force— when it inspires new ways of practicing the profession. What matters is not to confuse the rule with meaning.

Meaning itself also can erode. In times of liquid modernity, as Bauman (2003) would say, bonds fragment, relationships lose their durability, and reference points dissolve. In that context, being a good teacher means maintaining the bond when everything around is fleeting. Teaching is, in a way, resisting dissolution: offering permanence amid the flow.

Foucault (1975) added that power is also exercised in the definition of what is considered normal.

In schools, a “good teacher” is one who sticks to the dominant model. Yet the history of teaching is precisely made up of those who dared to disobey creatively. The teacher who adapts the lesson plan to include a different child, the professor who breaks the routine to listen, the one who chooses not to stay silent in a staff meeting... all of them embody an ethical resistance that disguises itself as everyday practice.

Nussbaum (2010) reminds us that emotions are not irrational, but forms of moral judgment. Compassion, indignation, joy, and sadness serve as compasses guiding practice. A good teacher, then, is not one who eliminates emotion, but one who turns it into an ethical criterion: to teach with empathy is not weakness, it is depth.

In that teachers’ lounge—that hybrid territory where the system meets humanity—the debate over “the good teacher” remains unresolved. And it shouldn’t be resolved. Because, as Ricoeur would say, narrative identity is written with every new word. The essential thing is not to close the story, but to keep it alive.

Being a good teacher is not about meeting standards or repeating methods. It is about keeping alive the conversation on the meaning of teaching, even when the noise of the system wants to silence it. It is, in Freire’s (1997) words, “to remain hopeful, even though everything invites discouragement”.

Y perhaps, after all, that is the most honest definition of a good teacher: one who continues to believe in education as a possibility, even when the world seems not to believe in it.

The imaginary of merit: promise, compass, and boundary

Merit was offered to us as a fair promise: “the greater the effort and qualifications, the greater the recognition”. In its positive aspect, it organizes the career, provides a horizon, and prevents arbitrariness. In its harsher aspect, however, it overlooks context, depoliticizes working conditions, and turns comparison into a way of life (Fraser, 2000; Bourdieu, 1994). Under statutes such as 1278, many teachers have felt that merit is measured with stable rules on unstable ground: fluctuating groups, scarce resources, exhausted time, and endless demands.

When merit becomes absolute, it tends to privatize blame: if you didn’t get promoted, “you must have done something wrong”; if your class didn’t improve, “you didn’t apply the right strategy”. The structural view fades, and self-doubt takes its place. Foucault warned that modern power mechanisms work best when the subject internalizes surveillance and governs themselves (Foucault, 1975/2008). The perfect meritocratic teacher is the one who constantly self-examines, adjusts their behavior to the protocol, and blames themselves when they don’t reach the target.

Now, merit can also be understood as justice if it recognizes unequal starting points and if it repairs, not just distributes (Fraser, 2000). It is not the same to evaluate someone with twenty books in their classroom library as someone who carries a briefcase of absences. The question is not whether merit works, but which merit we measure and for what purpose. When merit stops being a border and becomes a compass again, it illuminates; when it forgets the social landscape, it wounds.

Vocation: between myth, ethics, and care

“This is done out of vocation”, we say, and with that word we open both a bright door and a trap. A bright door, because it recalls the profound meaning of the profession: tending to the growth of others, creating time and space for something human to take place (Nussbaum, 2011; Dewey, 1997). A trap, because vocation sometimes operates as a mystique of sacrifice: the good teacher is the one

who endures everything, who stays longer hours, who “pays out of pocket”, who neither gets sick nor protests.

Freire defended a critical notion of vocation: loving education does not mean romanticizing suffering, but committing to the dignity of both the learner and the educator (Freire, 1997). Lived in this way, vocation does not colonize the teacher; it humanizes them. It is an ethics of responsibility, not a cult of martyrdom. When the system appeals to vocation to cover structural deficits —salaries, materials, time— it turns a virtue into an alibi.

Vygotsky reminds us that no one teaches alone; every practice is mediated by cultural tools and by others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vocation, then, is not an individual attribute locked inside one's chest, but a relationship nourished by contexts, support, and communities. If we want to take care of it, celebrating it is not enough: it must be sustained both materially and symbolically.

The teacher does not live by conscience alone: they also live by the mirrors that reflect them back. Honneth (1995) argues that the struggle for recognition is the engine of modern identities; being seen with respect nourishes moral self-esteem and enables action. When society treats teachers as “second-tier,” when the press reduces schools to rankings, when politics invokes them only during campaigns, a wound is inflicted, not only economic, but symbolic.

That recognition is contested across multiple arenas. In the classroom, where a “thank you, teacher” can sustain you for weeks; in the institution, where a fair word from the principal can legitimize or erode; in the neighborhood, where families either trust or question; in the State, which can turn the teacher into an ally or a suspect. Bourdieu would call it symbolic capital: accumulated prestige that enables or constrains one's voice (Bourdieu, 1994). Without that capital, even the best practice is left to the elements.

But recognition is not only external. There is also a recognition among peers that grounds a pedagogical citizenship: the gesture of sharing materials, the invitation to observe a class, the quiet applause for a small achievement. In times of competition, that economy of the gift acquires political weight: it affirms that the classroom is not an island, that the craft is shared.

Teacher identity: between habitus and possibility

Who am I when I say “I am a teacher”? A sociological answer would say: I am the sum of learned dispositions —the habitus— that guide me without my noticing (Bourdieu, 1994). A philosophical answer would add: I am also the capacity to begin something new, to act with others in order to inaugurate meaning (Arendt, 1958/2005). Between the two, teacher identity pulses like a tightened string: habituation and creation, routine and surprise.

In practice, identity is at stake in small decisions: what I keep to myself and what I say in staff meetings; how I organize time; when I prioritize the relationship over the content; when I say “no”. Dewey insisted that education is an experience that carries forward; each lesson transforms the next (Dewey, 1938/1997). That is why it is wise to suspect totalizing definitions: a teacher is not a fixed role but an ongoing process.

The good news is that imaginaries are not destiny. If they can be named, they can be remade. Bruner trusted in the narrative power to reorder experience (Bruner, 1991): telling what we do in a different way opens up possibilities for doing it differently. That is why writing, talking, and observing ourselves with honesty are not luxuries, but technologies of teachers' freedom.

Imaginaries in dispute: State, school and community

Imaginaries do not emerge out of thin air: they are instituted through policies, discourses, media, and everyday practices (Castoriadis, 1987). The State, with its language of “quality”, “merit”, and “evidence”, pushes certain meanings; the educational market adds others; unions, faculties of education, and school communities offer alternative significations. The school is the space where these forces meet and clash: a field of struggle (Bourdieu, 1994).

In that field, there are translations and resistances. The administrator who turns evaluation into conversation; the team that transforms the rubric into a tool for co-formation; the teacher who brings families’ voices into the meeting; the collective that discusses the statute without slogans. It is not about rejecting what comes “from above”, but about reappropriating it intelligently so that it stops being a threat and becomes a resource.

Fraser (2000) suggests thinking about justice as both recognition and redistribution. Applied to our context: it is not enough to change words if we do not change conditions (time, workload, salaries); and it is not enough to increase budgets if we do not change meanings (what we call good teaching, for whom we do it, how we evaluate ourselves). The dispute over imaginaries is, at its core, a dispute over the world.

The imaginaries of the teaching profession are not neutral: they express power struggles. The State promotes the imaginary of “quality”, the market that of “efficiency”, and teachers resist with those of “vocation” and “solidarity”. In schools, these narratives intersect and pull against each other: it is there that we decide which words will have a future. Rewriting imaginaries does not mean denying the achievements of public policy, but rather appropriating its language. Turning “evaluation” into “shared reflection”, “accountability” into “pedagogical dialogue”, “merit” into “active equity”. As Castoriadis reminds us, every society can reinvent its significations. The teaching profession, if it looks at itself clearly, can do the same.

Closing in order to open: a new pact with ourselves

Night returns, and there’s no coffee left in the room. Before leaving, someone writes on the bulletin board: “Pedagogical circle –Friday, 3 pm– topic: What does ‘achievement’ mean to us?”. It looks like a small note; in truth, it is a constituent act: an invitation to rewrite, among colleagues, the meanings that shape us. If imaginaries make worlds, calling them into dialogue is the beginning of making another.

Perhaps the pact we need doesn’t have to be grandiloquent. Maybe three commitments are enough: to name without fear what guides us (merit, vocation, recognition), to protect the conditions that sustain dignity (time, listening, justice), and to create more generous narratives about what counts as “good teaching”. As Freire reminded us, hope is not a naïve feeling; it is a method (Freire, 1997). And the method, in our craft, begins by asking together.

When the day ends, teachers close their notebooks and switch off the lights. No one hears the murmur in the background: the ideas left floating in the air.

What imaginaries sustain our identity? Which ones deserve to stay alive?

Naming is not theory: it is a political act. Because whoever names their world, recreates it.

Perhaps the future of the teaching profession does not depend only on laws, but on our collective capacity to imagine ourselves differently: not as martyrs or bureaucrats, but as public intellectuals

and caretakers of humanity.

Questions that keep resonating:

- What merits do we want to recognize, and how do we prevent them from becoming boundaries?
- How can we care for vocation without turning it into an excuse for precariousness?
- What concrete forms of recognition –among peers, institutional, and community-based– can we establish?
- What new narrative about “being a good teacher” are we willing to write?