

Senses of work for high school teachers during pandemic¹

Sentidos do trabalho para docentes do ensino médio durante a pandemia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents part of the results of a master's degree research project, which aimed to understand the meanings of teaching work during the period of remote activities, during the coronavirus pandemic. To this end, it is based on the understanding of Historical-Cultural Psychology that the objective world has its subjective expression, which constitutes an objective-subjective unity. This unity translates to people as subjective senses, composed of affective and cognitive processes. To produce the data, five focus group meetings were held with four high school teachers from a public school, located in the interior of São Paulo, and the qualitative methodology of the Nuclei of Sense was used for the analysis. The results indicated the formation of two nuclei: I) Pandemic context and teaching suffering, and II) Structural issues and teaching work, both synthesized mediations, through which it was demonstrated that the pandemic intensified processes of suffering that had already been affecting teachers, and that the use of Information and Communication

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta parte dos resultados de uma pesquisa de mestrado, que teve como escopo a apreensão dos sentidos do trabalho docente durante o período das atividades remotas, na pandemia do novo coronavírus. Para tanto, parte-se do entendimento da Psicologia Histórico-Cultural de que o mundo objetivo possui sua expressão subjetiva, dado que constitui uma unidade objetivo-subjetiva. Tal unidade se traduz para os sujeitos como sentidos subjetivos, composto por processos afetivos e cognitivos. Para a produção dos dados, foram realizados cinco encontros de um grupo focal com quatro docentes do Ensino Médio de uma escola pública, localizada no interior de São Paulo, e para a análise utilizou-se a metodologia qualitativa dos Núcleos de Significação. Os resultados indicaram a constituição de dois núcleos: I) Contexto pandêmico e sofrimento docente e II) Questões estruturais e trabalho docente, ambos sintetizaram mediações, por meio das quais ficou demonstrado que a pandemia intensificou processos de sofrimento que já vinham acometendo professores e professoras, e que o uso das Tecnologias de

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Technologies - ICTs - contributed to the dissemination of neoliberal ideology in Education. The study consolidated the activity as the genesis of the senses, which, due to the interference of pandemic conditions, materialized the emptying of teaching work.

Keywords: Teaching Job. Pandemic. Senses.

Informação e Comunicação – TICs – contribuiu para a disseminação da ideologia neoliberal na Educação. O estudo consolidou a atividade como a gênese dos sentidos, os quais, por interferência das condições pandêmicas, materializaram o esvaziamento do trabalho docente.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho Docente. Pandemia. Sentidos.

Introduction

We currently live in a global health state that no longer requires social isolation or remote work in schools⁴. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic (SARS-CoV-2) had significant impacts on the daily lives of teachers, staff, students, and their families, as well as on school policies.

In Brazil, classes were suspended and remote learning was implemented in both basic and higher education, across public and private institutions. In the state of São Paulo, classes were suspended in March 2020 (Decree No. 64.864, dated March 16, 2020), and in April of the same year, the school calendar was reorganized to accommodate the implementation of non-presential educational activities (Resolutions 44 and 45, dated April 20, 2020). In May 2020, the São Paulo Education Media Center Platform (Centro de Mídias da Educação de São Paulo) was established through State Decree No. 64.982, dated May 15, 2020, to coordinate remote education in public state schools. This mode of conducting classes and pedagogical activities lasted for over a year in São Paulo's public education network.

Throughout this process, numerous issues deepened the neglect toward teachers, exemplified by work overload and delays in the implementation of an effective state vaccination campaign for this professional group⁵, a decline in the

⁴ The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. On May 5, 2023, it announced the "end" of the pandemic, meaning the end of COVID-19 being characterized as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

⁵ Despite the state government's eagerness for the return to in-person classes, no pressure was exerted to include teachers on the priority list for vaccination. The National Plan for the Operationalization of COVID-19 Vaccination was launched on December 16, 2020, and divided into 10 phases. Teachers from basic to higher education were placed in phase 4 of the queue.

quality of education, and students' difficulty in grasping school content. Additionally, other factors that affected daily school life had consequences related to food security⁶, the exposure of children, adolescents, and women to domestic violence, and the lack of access to mental health care⁷.

In the face of this national and global crisis—marked by the suspension of possibilities for imagining the future and a growing questioning of the role of schools—this research aimed to understand the senses of teaching work during the pandemic⁸, using Historical-Cultural Psychology as its theoretical and methodological framework.

For data production, a focus group was organized with four high school teachers from a public school located in a small municipality in the interior of São Paulo state. A total of five meetings were held with the group via the digital platform *Google Meet*⁹. For the organization and analysis of the data, the method of Nuclei of Signification was used, which is a specific procedure from the historical-dialectical approach for qualitative research (AGUIAR & OZELLA, 2006; AGUIAR, SOARES, MACHADO, 2015).

2 Notes on Education and Pandemic Context

At first, the coronavirus pandemic presented itself as a new and unexpected situation. However, a critical and radical analysis of this phenomenon soon

⁶ A study conducted by the School Feeding Observatory revealed that, before the pandemic, 85% of Brazilian students relied on school meals. During the pandemic, 64% of students reported receiving some form of food assistance; however, only 14% reported receiving it consistently throughout the months schools remained closed. Furthermore, there were many reports concerning the insufficient quantity, variety, and quality of the food provided (OAE, 2021).

⁷ Data show that 70% of students reported experiencing anxiety or depression after returning to in-person classes, with symptoms such as lack of focus, insomnia, feelings of overload and excessive pressure, loss of self-confidence, and exhaustion (SENATE AGENCY, 2022). Additionally, there was a rise in cases of femicide and underreporting of domestic violence. Among adolescents, this may be linked to the loss of access to schools as safe spaces for identifying, reporting, and addressing such violence (TEÓFILO, 2020).

⁸ This article is the result of a master's research project conducted between 2019 and 2022: GOUVEA, Elisa. *Senses of teaching work during a pandemic: a historical-cultural analysis*. Dissertation (Master's in Psychology), Faculty of Sciences and Languages – São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho", Assis campus, São Paulo, 2022.

⁹ The participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), which was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sciences and Languages – São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho", UNESP – Assis Campus (CAAE 36076720.0.0000.5401).

revealed that such a scenario constituted a typical crisis of capitalism (MASCARO, 2020; SANTOS, 2020).

Historical-Cultural Psychology, grounded in the historical-dialectical materialist philosophy, proposes that to understand a phenomenon, it is necessary to engage in the processes of abstraction, analysis, and synthesis of reality, considering the complex mediations that coexist within the totality of any given phenomenon—a totality that is constantly in movement.

Here, a broader understanding is needed. The historical-dialectical materialist method, formulated by Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), from which the critique of bourgeois society originates, highlights the importance of numerous aspects—from economics to anthropology, from philosophy to history—in the structuring and historical development of human activity (MARX, 1986, 2010). It follows that human subjectivity is also multidetermined. In other words, each person's subjectivity is shaped according to the development of human objectifications, as these contain in themselves essential senses of the human genus.

This is relevant for analyzing the phenomenon of the pandemic—and more specifically here, the senses of work for teachers constituted in this context—because it provides instruments for understanding the historical, active, and productive role of the subject, while also explaining concrete reality and placing the historical development of humanity into perspective (LUKÁCS, 1965).

In other words, the process of apprehending the object of this study must consider the historical construction of education, the teaching profession as a category, and its processes of illness—and how all of this affects the production of singularities within the capitalist system in a pandemic context.

In this regard, Saviani (1994) highlights the relationship between formal education, as we know it today, and the division of society into classes based on private property. This relationship, which began with the end of feudalism and intensified with industrialization and the growth of cities, has placed on schools—since their inception to the present day—the role of introducing people into society and keeping it functioning according to the foundations of liberal ideology. Part of

the formal education model is the idea that individual work and effort lead to the acquisition of private property (PATTO, 1984, 1990).

The contradiction becomes apparent when one understands that knowledge, in capitalist society, is synonymous with a means of production. If the means of production required to maintain a class-based society must remain under bourgeois control, then offering free and quality education to the working class means offering that same class the means of production. Therefore, for the capitalist order to be preserved, it is necessary to provide only the minimum amount of knowledge required for the working class to continue producing and reproducing society—without consciously understanding that process (SAVIANI, 1994).

Novaes and Okumura (2020) update this perspective by emphasizing that, in the Brazilian context, we must also consider the effects of colonization, the absence of agrarian reform, and the fragility of our democracy. Both authors argue that Brazil was born for capitalism, “as a large plantation-producing enterprise of goods alien to our needs, based on slave labor” (p. 47). As long as we maintain such a structure—akin to a vast company that commodifies all our natural resources and the labor of the working class, especially Black and poor people—the problem of education will remain a reality.

In summary, educating the working class poses a risk to the Brazilian bourgeoisie, since it is essential that most of the population remain impoverished and illiterate in order not to appropriate the valuable means of production that is knowledge. As a result, the education offered to the working class is one that hinders the formation of critical thinking¹⁰ and the process of human emancipation.

Thus, if the reality of today’s schools carries within it the essence of class society and colonization, it is no surprise that these conflicts were also present in teaching and learning processes during the COVID-19 quarantine period.

The disparities characteristic of the Brazilian educational reality—

¹⁰ From the perspective of Historical-Dialectical Materialism, critique is understood as the process of seeking to grasp the essence of phenomena through the apprehension of material reality and its movement, thereby enabling an understanding of phenomena beyond their apparent form (PATTO, 1984).

intensified during the pandemic—also affected the relationships among people within the school community (teachers, students, administrators, staff, and families), as well as their work and study dynamics.

In the case of São Paulo's state education network, the distance learning measures adopted during the health crisis—attempts to maintain the transmission of content through apps that required internet access—only exacerbated pre-existing problems within this institution, such as: I) the State Department of Education's prioritization of institutional assessment metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed educational policies, to the detriment of the quality of school content and its potential to contribute to the holistic and complex development of human beings; and II) the deepening of social inequality, particularly affecting the most impoverished people who often lack access to the internet or electronic devices.

The latest PNAD (National Household Sample Survey) shows that 21% of students aged 5 to 17 in public schools do not have internet access, according to data compiled by the consulting firm Idados. **Folha de São Paulo [newspaper]** reported that more than a third of public school students in the 3rd year of high school who registered for the 2018 ENEM (National High School Exam) did not have internet access. The existence of broadband internet in schools further illustrates this inequality. Data from the Ministry of Education from 2018 shows that while 93% of public schools in São Paulo had broadband, the figure was just 14% in the state of Amapá (SALDANÃ, 2020, author's emphasis).

Pointing out the material basis of the Brazilian educational reality does not mean denying the scientific, philosophical, and artistic advances which, when disseminated in schools, have the potential to transform the conditions of alienation and oppression faced by children and adolescents.

The sciences, the arts, and philosophy are part of human history and, therefore, carry the contradictions generated by the class struggle that has marked historical development thus far. [...] Why couldn't the sciences, the arts, and philosophy—even though shaped by class struggle and, consequently, by alienation—generate new possibilities in the student's consciousness? (DUARTE, 2016, pp. 64–65)

This first part of the article sought to highlight the concreteness of the relationship between the Brazilian educational situation and the pandemic context, focusing on specific aspects that clearly posed limits and challenges to teaching activity across different levels of education. The following section aims to present how these objective working conditions shape the senses constructed by each individual regarding their professional role.

3 Human Activity and the Production of Sense(s)

The production of sense as the content of human consciousness once again brings into focus the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, since this dialectical unity is a reference point for the constitution of each person's singular processes.

Beyond the objectivity-subjectivity unity, the production of sense fundamentally arises from human activity, given the understanding that subjects are active, productive, social, and historical beings. Their development depends on the inseparability of internal (subjective) and external (objective) elements, which means that their psychological functions are (trans)formed—take on new forms—as their actions transform material reality, and vice versa.

To say that human activity, in its process of social production and reproduction, makes use of instruments and social signs that are appropriated with the aim of transforming both objectivity and subjectivity, is to affirm that teaching is an activity that encompasses the complexity of society, of individuals, and of their relationships with school content:

Thus, the process of acquiring human particularities, that is, culturally formed complex behaviors, demands the appropriation of the legacy objectified by historical-social practice. The internalization processes, in turn, interpose themselves between the interpersonal (interpsychic) and intrapersonal (intrapsychic) levels; which means they are constituted from the universe of human objectifications made available to each individual through the mediation of others—that is, through educational processes. (MARTINS, 2013, p. 217)

Therefore, placing human relationships at the center of knowledge construction and subject formation implies conceiving the cognitive-affective unity as constitutive of any and every activity—both for those who teach (teachers) and for those who learn (students)—as a unity that contributes to the formation of sense in each person's actions, a synthesis of cognitive and affective-emotional processes.

In the case of teaching activity—the focus of this study—it must be noted that it is structured around motives, which respond to that which drives people to act, think, and feel. These processes may be the path toward a real understanding of the productive process of phenomena, concrete relations of exploitation, and class antagonisms.

However, delving into and understanding the ways and processes through which sense is produced and reproduced—as an idea—within the dynamics of human consciousness implies the need for an instrument capable of operating the unity between objective and subjective processes. Language is this instrument that enables the operationalization of the flow of external and internal actions.

In Historical-Cultural Psychology, it is Vygotsky (1999) who identifies language as the sign par excellence and an indispensable category for explaining the dynamics of the human psyche, as it constitutes the semantic foundation of consciousness and enables social communication and the connection between internal and external worlds.

The author also emphasizes that understanding the process of language meaning-making is fundamental for comprehending the general organization of the psyche, especially through the relationship between thought and language (VYGOTSKY, 2000).

To grasp such a relationship, emphasis is placed on the *word*, which is constantly enriched by the dynamics between meaning and sense. This means that the word takes on the intellectual and affective content of the relationship established between the person and their context, revealing a dialectical unity between the two (meaning–sense).

Meaning, therefore, is regarded as a more stable, coherent, and precise category and, for this reason, is considered one of the zones of sense (Vygotsky, 2000). It plays a constitutive role in the development of the human being and of human society, insofar as we appropriate the social significations embedded in gestures and objects. Meaning is synonymous with generalization; it is the word seen from its inner aspect and, in a certain way, follows an external, social, and historical logic.

Although it appears more static and "dictionary-like," meaning admits qualitative changes within itself, which are related to the development of both the individual and society.

It is worth noting that meaning can only be realized insofar as thought materializes in the word. The word, in turn, if not linked to thought—and thus not signifying anything—is nothing more than an empty sound. When conceived as an object of the inner world that represents reality in its absence, the word becomes an object of consciousness and materializes thought in its expression, although it does not always succeed in this process.

Sense, according to Vygotsky (2000), refers to a unit composed of affective and cognitive elements that reveal a historically constructed singularity, thus aligning more closely with subjectivity than meaning¹¹. It carries the characteristic of being inexhaustible and incomplete.

If it is through activity that senses are constituted, it becomes essential to grasp the real processes that mediate both individual and collective psychic organization, as well as the concrete alternatives that enable subjects to have greater freedom in shaping their own existence.

Therefore, engaging with teaching activity during the pandemic required an understanding of the structural forces that, as part of concrete reality, mediated the production of sense for these subjects.

How was it possible for teaching work to maintain its integrity while being

¹¹ It is important to note that the distinction made here between meaning and sense is for didactic purposes only. As they constitute, dialectically, the unity between thought and language, these categories cannot be treated in isolation.

subjected to the structures of distance education and reinforced by the need for social isolation? How was the construction of the senses of this activity experienced by teachers who found themselves dispossessed of their content, means of production, and relationships? These were some of the questions that guided this scientific endeavor, which, through methodologically grounded procedures, the study sought to answer.

4 Methodological Path: Data Production

To produce the data, a focus group was used, which is understood as a qualitative approach procedure suited for research that aims to develop some type of collective and focused activity (GATTI, 2005).

This procedure assumes that participants are brought together based on a common criterion that qualifies them within the scope of the research, so that the material collected—although not in a homogeneous manner—encompasses their personal and everyday experiences. Thus, its objective is “[...] to capture, through the exchanges that occur within the group, concepts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way that would not be possible through other methods” (GATTI, 2005, p. 9).

In this study, the group was composed of four teachers from a public state school located in the countryside of São Paulo state. The table below presents some characteristics of the participants. In order to respect their privacy and ensure anonymity, their names have been omitted.

Table 1 - Information Focus on Group Participants

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
Gender Identity	Woman	Man	Woman	Man
Age	43 years old	41 years old	35 years old	37 years old
Race	White	White	Black	White
Marital Status	Married	Married	Married	Single
Subject Taught	Sociology and Electives	History	Physical Education	History
Class Schedule	Morning	Morning and Afternoon	Morning and Afternoon (also works at a municipal school in another city)	Morning and Afternoon
Education	Degree in Social Work	PhD in History	Degree in Physical Education and postgraduate specialization in progress	Degree in History
Has children? How many?	2 daughters	None	None	One 8-year-old son, who lives with his mother
Lives with	Husband and two daughters	Wife and stepdaughter	Wife	In a shared house with four other people

Source: research data (GOUVEA, 2022)

Following Gatti's (2005) guidelines for conducting focus groups, five sessions were held, each guided by previously prepared themes and scripts, namely: 1) The pandemic and teaching work; 2) The pandemic and family relationships; 3) The pandemic and physical and mental health/relationship with time and space; 4)

Collective senses of the pandemic / Personal senses of the pandemic; 5) Future perspectives / Action plan.

Each session lasted one hour and took place between August and October 2020. The meetings were conducted through the digital platform *Google Meet*, recorded, and transcribed in order to carry out the subsequent stages of the research.

To organize the data, the methodology of Meaning Cores (Núcleos de Significação) was employed. This is a procedure specific to the historical-dialectical approach used in qualitative research (AGUIAR & OZELLA, 2006; AGUIAR, SOARES, MACHADO, 2015).

This methodology focuses on the discourse of the participants, as it understands that words provide access to the psychic contents (senses and meanings) of the subjects.

Through the word, through the teachers' speech, we worked with the signs of a given context that made it possible to apprehend the senses of these subjects' activity.

Namely, the process of organizing the data and constructing the Meaning Cores consists of four main stages. The first is the identification of pre-indicators, which occurs through the recognition of themes that may emerge based on frequency, importance, emotional charge, contradiction, etc. (AGUIAR & OZELLA, 2006). It is a synthesis process that aims to apprehend the words of the empirical subject.

In the second stage—the formation of *indicators*—the criteria may arise from similarity, complementarity, or opposition. This is a process aimed at revealing the antitheses, that is, the negation of what was said, in which the empirical dimension is surpassed in order to access the historical dimension of the subject.

At this stage of the research, the grouping of the pre-indicators from the previous phase enabled the compilation of thirteen indicators: 1) Teacher-student relationship; 2) Information and Communication Technologies and teaching activity during the pandemic; 3) Knowledge and mastery of Information and Communication Technologies and their tools; 4) Future perspectives; 5) Understanding of what teaching entails; 6) (Lack of) support and (de)valuation of

the profession; 7) Relationship with other teachers during the pandemic; 8) Challenges of quarantine; (9 Pandemic: negative vs. positive; expectations vs. reality; 10) Understanding of the capitalist political and economic reality; 11) Social meaning of teaching activity; 12) Career trajectory; 13) Gender issues.

The synthesis of the indicators described above led to the identification of two Meaning Cores, which made it possible to observe the contradictions and transformations that occur in the process of constructing senses and meanings. This, in turn, contributes to the consideration of both subjective conditions and contextual and historical ones.

Table 2 - Meaning Cores

Teacher-student relationship	Pandemic context and teacher suffering
ICTs and teaching activity during the pandemic	
Knowledge and mastery of ICTs and their tools	
Understanding of what constitutes teaching practice	
(Lack of) support and (de)valuation of the teaching profession	
Relationship with other teachers during the pandemic	
Challenges of quarantine	
Pandemic: negative vs. positive / expectations vs. reality	
Gender issues	
Future perspectives	Structural issues and teaching work
Social significance of teaching activity	
Understanding of the capitalist political and economic reality	
Professional trajectory	

Source: research data (GOUVEA, 2022)

Finally, the analysis of the Meaning Cores itself allowed for the apprehension of what is manifested beyond the surface of the discourses. At this stage, the interpretative nature of the participants' speech was prioritized.

5 Analysis and Discussion of the Results

From the perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology, every analysis must seek the relationships among the different aspects that constitute the totality of the object studied. The dialectical understanding of phenomena presupposes the study of things in search of their historical process—that is, their root, their genesis—which gives rise to the concept of radicality.

At this study stage, the two Meaning Cores – Pandemic Context and Teacher Suffering and Structural Issues and Teaching Work – supported the argument that senses are engendered within the core of human activity.

Regarding the core "Pandemic Context and Teacher Suffering," it was found that teacher distress was neither new nor uncommon for this professional category before the pandemic. However, the pandemic context intensified the complications arising from remote work.

According to the teachers' reports, both physical illnesses — such as muscle injuries, spinal problems, fatigue, and weight gain — and mental health issues — especially marked by exhaustion, alcoholism, difficulty in making time “productive,” trouble concentrating, irritability, depression, and a sense of lost identity — emerged or were worsened due to the exhausting work routine during the quarantine.

Thus, the illness experienced by the interviewed teachers reveals the lack of support this professional category receives from the institutions that regulate their profession, exposing a contradiction within the educational system in capitalist society. The State, the main institution responsible for enabling the reproduction and employment of this workforce, is also accountable for the precarization and perpetuation of this category's suffering (SOARES & MARTINS, 2017).

The lack of support and the experience of suffering were also evident in the relationship established between the teachers and the Information and

Communication Technologies (ICTs). It was possible to grasp the impact of technological mediation on the construction of the senses of their work in various ways, through the teachers' discourse—whether in the transformation it caused in the transmission and appropriation of school content, or in the relationships between teachers and students, as well as among the teachers themselves. "Personally, I haven't talked to anyone [about the issue of physical and mental suffering]". (Teacher B)

The helplessness experienced by the teachers is therefore evident in the various relationships they establish in their work activity—whether with parents and guardians, the school's coordination, or even among their colleagues. The teachers' statement that they "haven't talked to anyone" about the causes of their suffering reveals an understanding that, in no instance, were these workers offered the opportunity to speak and be heard regarding their conditions. This may reflect the competition, segregation, and individualism inherent in the market-driven structure of distance education (FREITAS, 2018).

As a result of social isolation and the use of ICTs, another aspect raised by the teachers as a source of suffering is related to school content, which should be interpreted as instruments of teaching work.

Their reflections allowed us to observe that, for the most part, what is considered central to the pedagogical relationship was viewed negatively — that is, school content, during the pandemic, was referred to as something "technical," "mechanical," "individualized," and "lacking feedback."

"It's my impression that, within my discipline and with my classes, it seems like things aren't really flowing when it comes to the actual teaching part. Activities are happening, they're turning them in, but it's all very mechanical and bureaucratic." (Teacher B)

From the teachers' perspective, the school content conveyed through remote learning during the pandemic, rather than constituting a subjectivist practice confined to students' everyday lives, lost its substance and came to serve only the purpose of enabling students to "move on to the next grade."

The teaching of history, for example, becomes something chronological and deterministic, as if there were no conflicts of interest in the production of humanity's events. Who produced such content? For what purpose? How was it produced? What is its genesis? These are not the kinds of relations that emerge in the teacher's activity when using digital technologies. What emerges is the idea that the content must be covered simply because it is necessary to "fill in the gradebook." "It ends up being something kind of... you know, just for show, just to fill in the gradebook, because the actual teaching part, I think, yeah... it's not really flowing." (Teacher B)

Such reduction to a utilitarian dimension and the relativization of systematized knowledge is identified by Cantarelli, Facci, & Campos (2017) as one of the factors that lead to the emptying of both knowledge and teaching practices. It is no wonder, therefore, that teachers frequently reported a sensation of lost sense and identity when performing their work through the mediation of technologies. During remote learning, teachers remained distanced from the means of producing their own work and its results.

That said, we reaffirm the question posed by Facci & Urt (2017, p. 14): "Do teachers fall ill because they are unable to follow the rules imposed on pedagogical work, or do they fall ill because they are unable to teach, to fulfill the social meaning attributed to their profession?"

The disruption in the teaching and learning process also transformed the teacher-student relationship, contributing to teacher burnout, as the motivation behind both parties' engagement became reduced to something purely technical and bureaucratic—thus impoverishing the development of subjective senses for teachers.

To dispossess teachers of their instruments of work—content and methods—as well as their autonomy and collective belonging, leaves them alienated from the senses of their activities, stripped of their formative role, and distanced from the human essence. Furthermore, when faced with the implementation of distance learning, teachers find themselves resisting the interests of large corporations, which hold significant power and influence in the introduction of new technologies into schools.

To grasp the mediations that constitute the second Core of meaning, titled “Structural issues and teaching work,” it was necessary to draw upon the theoretical contributions of Historical-Cultural Psychology regarding memory and the construction of senses (MARTINS, 2013; REY, 2007; VYGOTSKY, 2018; VYGOTSKY & LEONTIEV, 2020), given that the teachers’ narratives largely followed a movement between past, present, and future.

Thus, the concept of sense is situated within a temporal dimension. Kosik (1976) prompts us to reflect on the human capacity to configure the present in light of the future— a dynamic that can only be apprehended through dialectical reasoning: “Only the dialectics inherent in the movement of things itself transforms the future, delegitimizes the immediate future as falsehood or one-sidedness, and asserts the mediated future as truth” (KOSIK, 1976, p. 224, emphasis in the original). The mediated future refers to that in which human beings actively engage in its construction, possessing awareness of the process and subordinating it to their own motivations.

In a study addressing human creative activity, Vygotsky (2018) discusses the human capacity to imagine and construct the future based on past experiences and sensations, which are accumulated within the complex totality of consciousness. The creative function differs from memory, which is limited to the reconstruction of the past and the reproduction of previous events; memory assists us in adapting to repeated, habitual, and everyday circumstances. In contrast, the capacity to create and combine elements never before experienced allows for an increasingly diverse range of possibilities— enabling us, for instance, to imagine and strive for political and economic systems that are not grounded in class exploitation.

Memory, however, is no less important for understanding this process. Martins (2013) highlights: “The historical experience of humanity would be impossible in the absence of a psychic property whose central function was to record and store the traces resulting from it — that is, it would be impossible in the absence of memory” (p. 154).

It is through human activity in the present that human beings, drawing from their past, are able to envision the transformation of the future. The concept of praxis reveals the creative nature of human reality, which can only be fully grasped through the dialectical materialist method, since, by not opposing practice and theory, it encompasses the unity between subject and object, between human beings and the world, and between product and productivity (KOSIK, 1976).

Such a movement emerged from the narratives of the teachers who participated in this research, making it possible to reflect on the production of senses within this process since the three-dimensionality of time (past, present, and future) is part of human existence and manifests itself through work activity.

The theoretical and methodological approach underpinning this research seeks to overcome conceptions that reduce memory to mere organic maturation. Logical and voluntary memory, understood as a higher/cultural psychological function, depends on the organic development of the brain — specifically, the maturation of the amygdala and hippocampus within the limbic system. However, beyond this, it relies on the semantic operations performed by thought. The understanding of the semantic aspect of memory is what grants it logic, integrating it with thought, since it involves the association of elements memorized separately. In this process, the social meanings of words play a fundamental role, as they help to organize memory.

In this way, we understand that the senses constructed by the teachers regarding their activity depend on their life trajectories and the way these experiences are organized and given meaning within their memories. This does not mean, however, that the senses they construct are static. On the contrary, they are historical and in constant movement.

The constitution of senses and meaning regarding teaching activity, for each of the participants, is not only intertwined with their life history, but also connected to the process of socialization within capitalist society and the conditions it imposes on the profession.

The teachers recall their life trajectories, the contradictions between what they understood as the social meaning of being a teacher during childhood, and

what they experienced in their undergraduate and postgraduate education and in the school reality. All of this contributes to their processes of imagining a future

Well, um... **I'm the daughter of a teacher**, right? My mother was—she's retired now—a teacher in the public school system, so I always had that side of me, you know, I liked going to school with my mom, I'd be there, always doing things alongside her.

When I grew up and finished school, I said I wasn't going to follow that path, that I wasn't going to become a teacher, that I didn't want that. So, I chose to study Social Work. I did my first degree in Social Work, but then it was like it was meant to be, because everything... well, I went to do an internship and ended up in Education. Then I got a temporary job at city hall, and I started working with children with special needs—again, in Education, right?

And then I was basically forced to go back and get a second degree in Pedagogy, because in order to work as a Social Worker with kids who have learning difficulties, I had to have a degree in Pedagogy. So, I enrolled in Pedagogy. Then back and forth, back and forth... **I signed up for the state teaching system, I got in, thinking I was going to teach wonderfully, just like my mom used to.**

Illusion, right? {...} (Teacher A)

The construction of senses in teaching activity, therefore, was, for the interviewed professionals, not merely dependent on fulfilling bureaucratic or academic tasks, but closely tied to the subjective dimension—their memories and the intrinsic humanization present in the teacher-student relationship.

The teachers expressed a longing for the return to in-person activities, associating it with something that would restore their vitality. The teaching and learning process, being humanizing, is also invigorating, and reveals the need to be together—as a collective—in order to restore hope. Work that carries sense makes them feel “alive, useful, productive,” and part of a class, despite the exploitation, as it brings the worker into contact with their own potential.

They also acknowledged being aware of the obstacles imposed by the political and economic structure of capitalist society, in the face of which some appeared more optimistic than others. Two of the teachers reported that, despite the difficulties, they could not imagine themselves working in any other field but Education. What they envision as a possible path to overcoming this state of frustration and discouragement includes personal investment in continued

education, leisure activities, efforts to keep up with advances in ICTs and how these have been integrated into education, and daily engagement with students—rekindling hope without denying the movement of reality:

Yeah, I agree with Teacher C again, you know, **this issue of technology—it's obviously not neutral, right?** It's not free from the interests that lie behind it, and that's a characteristic of this... this neoliberalism that keeps consuming everything, right, and everyone. **All possible forces end up being sucked into this... this new form of capital exploitation.** (Teacher B)

The results of this study alert us to the fact that analyzing events in their totality is a challenge. Therefore, the senses constructed by the teaching profession regarding its professional activity is not a matter that ends here. On the contrary, the subjective records that shaped the activity of these workers during the pandemic will continue to have consequences in both their present and future.

Our analyses, although partial, aim to highlight that the implications of the pandemic context remain embedded in various dimensions of Brazilian educational reality. Therefore, it is essential to reinforce that both objective and subjective conditions are incorporated into the nature of sense, since both are responsible for the production, maintenance, and unfolding of the sense of work as a subjective image of reality.

6 Final Considerations

The theme and main objective of this study were to understand the sense of work for a group of teachers at a public school in a small municipality in the interior of São Paulo state. More specifically, the study aimed to identify the most expressive elements in the construction sense regarding teaching work, shaped through the lived experience of the pandemic, and to reflect on how this context interfered with collective relationships—with students, with school content, and, above all, how the mediation of technologies became present in teaching practices, producing new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting during the pandemic period.

The analysis results indicated two constitutive references for the senses attributed to this work in the pandemic context: one of a structural nature, which situates teaching within a broader political, economic, and social context harshly impacted by the pandemic; and another that reveals the individual suffering experienced by each teacher, intensified by different types of individual and collective experiences that emerged during this period.

The two core references— “*Structural issues and teaching work*” and “*Pandemic context and teacher suffering*”—were representative of the ongoing contradiction between objective and subjective conditions which, as a dialectical unity, constitute the contents of consciousness and underpin individuals’ psychological processes.

Teachers’ narratives revealed that it is impossible to understand the sense of teaching activity without a conjunctural analysis of the educational reality—one that acknowledges the class struggles inherent to the capitalist system in which we live. After all, the political-pedagogical project that guides teaching work and school routines is built within the framework of the prevailing societal model.

In this way, it reinforces the understanding that the construction of senses takes place within social relations embedded in a specific cultural and historical structure, mediated by signs, which give rise to a process of singularization within a particular semantic field.

It was possible to observe that the teachers did not completely distance themselves from the social meanings of their activity; there is an awareness of the importance and transformative function that this work fulfills within the context of contemporary society. However, contradictions emerge in their statements when they point to illness, exhaustion, isolation, and loneliness—conditions that, in a manner analogous to barbarity, accompanied the remote work imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, almost forcing them to abandon any attempt to make their practices human.

The reflections of this group of teachers clearly revealed how the construction of senses in their professional activity, during the pandemic, was deeply dependent on their past experiences. Their current references—

conceptions, feelings, suffering, and actions—were developed based on earlier circumstances—what they used to think and feel about teaching, comparisons with others’ work—but are now coupled with present-day demands. This shows that sense is a synthesized content that encompasses past, present, and future, all framed by the current situation.

Thus, we consider that sense is a key category for the study and analysis of human phenomena, as well as for constructing proposals for praxis, since sense is a totality in movement, existing within another systemic totality—that of consciousness.

It is, therefore, an effective category for understanding the school environment and its actors within their historicity, allowing us to think about and shape its future while preserving its past and present.

Sentidos do trabalho para docentes do ensino médio durante a pandemia

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta parte de los resultados de una investigación de maestría, que tuvo como objetivo comprender los significados del trabajo docente durante el período de actividades remotas, durante la pandemia del nuevo coronavirus. Para ello, partimos de la comprensión de la Psicología Histórico-Cultural de que el mundo objetivo tiene su expresión subjetiva, dado que constituye una unidad objetivo-subjetiva. Tal unidad se traduce a los sujetos como sentidos subjetivos, compuestos de procesos afectivos y cognitivos. Para producir los datos, se realizaron cinco reuniones de grupos focales con cuatro profesores de secundaria de una escuela pública, ubicada en el interior de São Paulo, y para el análisis se utilizó la metodología cualitativa de los Centros de Sentido. Los resultados indicaron la constitución de dos núcleos: I) Contexto pandémico y sufrimiento docente y II) Cuestiones estructurales y trabajo docente, ambas mediaciones sintetizadas, a través de las cuales se demostró que la pandemia intensificó procesos de sufrimiento que ya venían afectando a docentes y docentes, y que el uso de las Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones – TIC – contribuyó a la difusión de la ideología neoliberal en la Educación. El estudio consolidó la actividad como génesis de significados, que por la interferencia de las condiciones de pandemia materializaron el vaciamiento de la labor docente.

Palabras clave: Trabajo Docente. Pandemia. Sentido.

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