

# **Are we all workers in Education? Reflections about teacher identities from the teachers' Union perspective\***

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## **Abstract**

The work discusses implications of the phenomenon of teacher unionization upon the identities of this category, especially when considering the alleged process of its proletarianization, and the inclusion of other school personnel in the teachers Unions. The arguments are based on two studies carried out with Union officials from CPERS/SINDICATO (Teachers Center of the State of Rio Grande do Sul – Union of Workers in Education), representing different degrees of participation in the political hierarchy of the organization. The theoretical framework used recovers the genesis of school and teaching, approaching two of its most significant images: women's work and proletarian work. The article deals with teachers' unionization in Brazil, a phenomenon that becomes official after the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, but that had consolidated before that: during the struggles for democracy under the dictatorship. The analysis reveals a variety of positions among Union officials with regard to the teachers' identities as workers in Education or as professionals, even though a universal feature is the absence of mentions to the modifications in the process of teacher work to justify the proletarianization. There is also agreement with respect to the instrumental aspect of the affiliations, that is, to the fact that most people become affiliated to obtain personal advantages. The conclusions point out to the hybrid character of the current teachers' identities. They also present for analysis the fact that, although the phrase "workers in Education" might indicate a dilution of teachers among the other categories of workers of the school, the opposite is noticeable: the teacher category subsumes the other school personnel.

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## **Keywords**

Teacher work – Teacher Union movement – Teacher identity – Workers in Education.

## **Focus of the work and basic definitions**

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the debates about the issue of the teaching work, and it starts with the articulation of two approaches: the dichotomy between the process of proletarianization and demands of professionalism; and the unionization as an indicator of one of the identities of the category. As to the first of these aspects, since the later decades of the 20th century, we have been witnessing substantial modifications in the management of education systems, with repercussions on the organization and division of the teaching work. For many observers, we have been faced with a phenomenon of proletarianization, which has connections with the loss of social status and with the impoverishment of the category. At the same time, the more the education system is expanded and the more the category is 'proletarianized', the more the professionalization of the activity is demanded, in an attempt to hold up the process and recover the lost status.

The unionization of teachers is part of this contradictory situation: the organization similar to those of manual workers (proletarianized) would express the way to resist to the losses suffered.

From the methodological point of view in the study of these issues, I have not been dealing with the analysis of the process of the teaching work itself, but rather with the exam of the arguments used by the teachers to explain their situation, which can spill into the topic related to their unionization. This methodological procedure follows from an option to learn how people build their identities, and which representations of the teaching work circulate in school contexts. I also agree with the idea that neither representations nor identities are fixed, but produced and reproduced daily, and not inherent to the individuals.

In the present text, I shall deal with aspects of the process of teachers' unionization, with basis on data collected in

two studies carried out since 1999 with CPERS/SINDICATO (Teachers Center of the State of Rio Grande do Sul – Union of Workers in Education), the largest Union of workers in Education in the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

For the analysis that shall follow, I have gathered information from three groups of subjects that work in the above mentioned Union, sorted according to their level of participation in the Union's hierarchy. The first group was composed by eight managers of the Union at the State level – five women and three men –, who had taken part of at least one board of directors during the 1990s, that is, in the 90-93, 93-96 or 96-99 terms. In this group, they are all affiliated to political parties of various denominations, and they belong to different Union movements.

The second group has 17 teachers (13 female and 4 male) who belonged to the Council of Representatives of a regional section of the Union, the 24th Center (1999-2002 mandate). In this group, composed mainly by members of the lower ranks of the Union, that is, school representatives, the affiliation to political parties and the participation in Union movements were varied, some members being very independent politically, i.e., without a clear party and/or Union identity.

Five women and two men from the board of directors of the same 24th Center (2002-2005 mandate) comprised the third group, one of the women being an administrative school employee and the others teachers. These subjects belonged all to the same Union movement, and not all of them were affiliated to political parties, despite being all supporters.

Semi-structured interviews were used with the first and third groups, and with the second group a questionnaire with open-ended questions was applied.

Based on the findings with all these subjects, I would like to discuss the following questions: what motives are presented for the unionization of teachers? What arguments are

deployed in favor of regarding teachers as professionals or as proletarians? What consequence for the teachers' identities has the fact that the Union has incorporated other segments of workers in Education, thereby calling itself a Union of workers in Education?

Some references will be presented in the next two sections to define the theoretical background used to interpret the data. After that, we shall introduce relevant information about the Union investigated, and then the appropriate data will be discussed. Closing the article, we shall put forward some concluding remarks.

### **Genesis of the modern school and teaching**

Just like the school we know today in the West, the characteristics of the teaching activity were established gradually, modifying, sometimes smoothly, sometimes radically, the images representing those who undertook it during the centuries.

The process of development of the so-called 'modern' school was lengthy, going from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. We can even say that such process contributed to *bring about* the Modern Era, including transformations in the idea of childhood, of what *education* would be, and of where (children's) education should take place. Several authors concur that, step by step, the urban concentration, the ascent of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class, the dissemination of economic liberalism and of the ideals of the Illumination, among other factors, constructed the perspective of a school distanced from its cradle: the Church (Clausse, 1977; Lerena, 1985; Petitat, 1989).

Nevertheless, according to Nóvoa (1991), the process of statization of school starts effectively at the end of the 18th century, bringing with it changes in the conception of teacher. The duty of teaching and schooling is attributed to the lay State, creating the need for

the 'employee-zation' of the teaching activity. Still, "as the genesis of the *teaching profession* is prior to the statization of the school" (p. 118), the constitution of this professional is marked by the idea of teaching as 'priesthood', and this situation exists alongside the characteristics that begin to be associated to the profession. Among the latter it is possible to mention the permit or license to teach, which gives certain professional autonomy.

However, this autonomy is only partial: as civil servants, teachers have to submit to ideological and political control, even if it does not entail giving up the demands for "a less *administrative* (in the bureaucratic sense) and more *professional* (in the liberal sense) statute" (Nóvoa, 1991, p. 123).

It is worth stressing here this anxiety to get closer to the liberal professions, which is examined by Fernández Enguita (1991) when discussing the idea of teaching as a semi-profession. Competence, vocation, self-regulation, license and independence are characteristics of the liberal professions, only partially shared by other professions, such as teaching. Although teachers need a specific education/title, their *competence* is more frequently questioned the more we come to the present day. *Vocation* for teachers has been understood as renouncing to working and living conditions compatible with their qualifications; as all that is left to those that could not find anything better. Entering the profession and controlling its exercise – what is called *self-regulation* – are prerogatives of the 'employer', that is, of the State, leaving the teaching class without its own code of ethics. As to the *license* to teach, albeit only those regarded as teacher are able to teach, there are today possibilities of teaching in unregulated courses and/or in areas of knowledge or levels of teaching for which there is no specific teaching education (as is the case of higher education). Lastly, as to *independence*, the degree of autonomy of the teaching class is relative both to the organizations (the State and

other employers) and to its public (the school community).

At any rate, the teaching class, with the intent of strengthening teaching as a profession, starts to demand a specific formation, something that will only happen in a more organized fashion in the 19th century. Nóvoa (1991) points out that the creation of teacher education schools as a result of pressure from the teachers themselves inaugurates a system of “social stratification based on schooling criteria and on the principle of superiority of those that dispense instruction” (p. 125).

In other words, teachers try to add to the incorporated state of the cultural capital they have an institutionalized state of this capital, represented by the education credential written in the diploma (Bourdieu, 1999). With that, what kind of people is then recruited to work as a teacher? “The poor and little instructed masters of the early 19th century are, within the space of a few decades, replaced by *professionals* formed and prepared for the exercise of the teaching activity” (Nóvoa, 1991, p. 125). However, since the 1950s, a series of changes occurred in the western countries will gradually influence the recruiting of these professionals, resulting in the *feminization of teaching*.

By feminization we mean the result of a process of massive increase of the female workforce in teaching (*feminization*) that gradually influenced the representations made about the character of this profession, including its social value (Yannoulas, 1996). Nowadays, feminization and proletarianization are the most conspicuous features of teaching, and they are, according to some authors such as Apple (1987), interconnected. To this latter author, patriarchal forms of control of teaching were, within decades, replaced by more technical forms, associating this phenomenon to the proletarianization experienced by the teaching category, particularly since the later half of the 20th century. At any rate, during all this time several representations about teaching coexisted,

and in all of them gender has had an important role, especially with regard to the feminine gender, so that eventually teaching has become recognized as a woman’s work (Louro, 2001).

Thus, since from a sociological point of view the higher the degree of feminization the higher the degree of proletarianization of a category, these two phenomena were put in association, *declaring* or *establishing* that a woman has smaller need of a good salary and better professional status. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that with the impoverishment and loss of prestige the teaching category organized, notably since the last century, in trade unions which by their own nature – or rather, by their historical and cultural construction – subsumed the genericized subjects under the idea of a de-genericized social class. The scarcity of discussions of gender relations in society and education is noticeable in the teacher unions, just as in other trade unions or indeed in any other sphere of public activity, including the larger part of the academic literature that interprets social phenomena (Ferreira, 2004).

Lastly, he calls attention to the contradictory aspect that teachers’ unionization represents in terms of occupational identity. According to some authors (Arroyo, 2002; Tiramonti, 2001), teachers’ identities are hybrid with respect to being a liberal professional or a worker. The reasons for someone joining a union do not necessarily follow from self-identification as a worker, but may be of an instrumental nature, that is, to obtain more immediate individual advantages. This is what we shall discuss now.

### **Why teachers join trade unions?**

The phenomenon of teachers’ unionization is international, despite country and continental specificities. In Brazil, this movement intensifies during the democratic transition, especially because most teachers were State employees and, as such, were

forbidden to create unions until the end of the dictatorship and the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1988. Before that, there were teacher associations (not trade unions), which “emerged along with the organization of the public school systems since the 1930s” (Souza, 1997, p. 145).

During the struggle for democratic liberties, many of these associations, despite being forbidden to constitute themselves officially as unions, actually functioned as such, both in the redemocratization of society and in corporate demands.

Constitute, then, characteristics of the Brazilian teacher union movement, especially of those congregating public school teachers, and even before they acquired the right to strike: the mass mobilizations typical of the ‘combative union movement’; the bottom-up organization, i.e., by workplace (school) and region, constituting finally regional organizations; the gradual identification with the ‘new union movement’ through the affiliation of unions to the Workers Central Union<sup>1</sup>; the later unification, in the case of basic school teachers, of teachers and non-teaching staff in the same unions. Currently, with the new Constitution, the nationwide entity that congregates the regional entities is the National Confederation of Workers in Education<sup>2</sup>, originated from the Confederation of Primary Teachers of Brazil<sup>3</sup>. In short, we can say that the current teacher unions possess forms of organization and operation that make them similar to non-professional entities. Besides, such organizational format could be indicative of one of the types of occupational/ideological identities that the teacher category has been taking on.

Thus, when referring to CNTE, Gadotti tries to explain the changes in the conscience of the teacher class with regard to their own social position:

The denomination of ‘workers in education’ in lieu of ‘educators’, ‘teachers’ or ‘professionals of education’ reflects the change of perception of the category itself

amidst the wider group of workers. The category realizes that the problems affecting teachers are basically the same problems faced by other categories of workers. As a consequence, the struggles of the teaching category are considered, from that point on, similar to those of workers in general. (1996, p. 15)

Likewise, it is worth recalling here the position of Arroyo at the time of the struggles for democratic liberties, as expressed in 1979 in a text with a suggestive title, published in a journal of an equally suggestive title. The article entitled “Industry workers and educators in identification: what lies ahead for Brazilian education?” opens the issue of the journal whose front page reads “EDUCATOR = WORKER”. In that text, the author wished to systematize some of the positions found in the movement practice of teachers and in educational research about the teachers’ new identity. Thus, he proposed that such practice would reveal the kind of articulation between the teacher category and the other workers necessary “to fight against the bourgeois school” (1980, p. 16).

The new conscience and the new practice of workers in education is to feel as workers and to have the need to associate as such, and to organize their struggle along the same lines as production workers, commerce workers [...] and above all to feel solidary to the same objectives of questioning the socio-political and economic model, the State, the organization of labor [...] that produces and exploits them as workers. (1980, p. 17-18)

Indeed, at that time, Arroyo presented the changes in the process of teaching as similar to those experienced by workers in general, thus signaling to the pertinence of the teachers

**1.** In Portuguese CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*).

**2.** In Portuguese CNTE (*Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Educação*).

**3.** In Portuguese CPPB (*Confederação dos Professores Primários do Brasil*).

'joining' the ranks of the workers' movement:

The fact that it is a struggle of the latter category (the teachers) shows that the effects of the educational policy that established in the school system the labor organization that dominates the capitalist business production are engendering their contradictions. If the objective was the division and hierarchization of the education work, what actually happened was the splitting, salary and functional differentiation, the downgrading of the basic-level educators, which represent the bulk of teachers, and consequently the arising of their conscience and organization (1980, p. 17).

In an approach that focuses more on the concrete actions of the teachers' union movement, since the social struggles for the end of the political regime of exception, Souza (1997) indicates four significant moments. The first would be the redemocratization, which would lead to a new juridical-institutional order. The second would be the promulgation of the Constitution, in which the union movement hoped to see materialized the expansion of the rights to education and the improvement of the working conditions. The third moment happened in 1989 with the first election of a president by direct vote since the end of the dictatorship, when the discussion of education projects for the whole country was expected to take place. And the last moment referred to the resistance to the pay rise policies brought about by the neoliberal scenario. As a result of this process, the author points out that the teacher movement has been putting forward more defense strategies than strategic proposals.

On the other hand, something that can be observed in these decades of teachers' political union activity, now joined with other education employees under the banner of "workers in Education", is that the option for union affiliation, as an option for a class identity, seems to be one currently of the more

prevailing images of the teaching profession. The teacher union movement actions follow what could be expected from a movement of wage workers, affiliated to the CUT and possessing a large number of its activists identified with the Workers Party<sup>4</sup> or other left-wing political groups, with the majority of discussions and demands falling in the economic category, especially the protection of wages and better career prospects. Regional differences observed, the level of affiliation is high, although this indicator must be taken carefully. As Cardoso says,

[...] affiliation should not be taken as a universal measure of the vertical legitimacy of the representation in the trade union movement, either because non-affiliated do take part in collective actions, or because many of the affiliated do not (1999, p. 96-97)

Nevertheless, this identity begins to show cracks. Souza (1997) says that "the representations made by teachers of the union reveal a contradiction between educational and trade union struggles" (p. 157), - in such a way that teachers begin to see the union "as a strike-provoking entity" (p. 151) - , something that results in the dissatisfaction of those who use the school. Also Vianna, reviewing the matter, presents indicators

[...] of the crisis of the teachers union organization: 1) exhaustion of strikes; 2) absence of dialogue with the population that use the public schools; 3) political-ideological divergences within the unions; 4) distancing between the associations/union leaders and the teachers. (1999, p. 36)

Still, there are no signs that such crisis has promoted substantial changes, neither in the "proletarian" image of teaching, nor in the process of teacher unionization. As said above,

**4.** In Portuguese PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*).

the 'proletarian' image of the teachers is one of the existing images, and it exists alongside the wish for professionalization, that is, these identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Guerrero Serón (1991) tells us that the reasons for joining the teachers' union can be varied. The author mentions three main motives: the ideological, the solidary, and the instrumental, referring to the defense of beliefs, of collective interests, and of individual interests, respectively. It seems to me that these motives are often intertwined, but we would accept the hypothesis that most teachers join the union for instrumental reasons, or that any person does have this motive in mind when joining the union.

Taking the case of Brazil, and adopting a chronological viewpoint, we could think that the more we go back to the time of the struggle against the military dictatorship, the more we see affiliations for ideological and solidary reasons. On the other hand, the more recent idea that the union is a promoter of strikes reveals some exhaustion of traditional forms of struggle, and a historical abandonment of the initial moments of the creation of the unions, being more likely to be put forward by those who have joined the unions more recently, for instrumental reasons. This latter group of people is more 'understood' by those who are concerned with collective interests than by those who continue to defend teacher affiliation to unions as a moral obligation, based on political convictions or reasons of coherence. In view of this briefly sketched scenario, the question arises as to the ability of the teacher union movement of renovating itself to respond with other identity policies, in other words, if the movement is prepared to see that new teachers enter the system with new life histories and worldviews.

### **The CPERS/Sindicato, its members and direction**

This section gives some information about the organization studied here and its

members, with the purpose of outlining its forms of regulation and its origin.

The CPERS/Sindicato is the representative body of the teachers (fundamental and secondary school) of the State of Rio Grande do Sul Public School System. It is the current version of the Civil Association "State of Rio Grande do Sul Teachers' Center", which became a union in 1989. But its origins can be traced back to the "State Primary Teachers' Center" established on April 21st 1945. Affiliated to the CUT since April 26th 1996, it has 42 Regional Centers, its basic organizations that follow the official division of the State education administrative structure, the Regional Education Agencies (REAs<sup>5</sup>). For example, the 24th Center, where part of the data for this work was collected, covers the towns under the jurisdiction of the 5th REA, both based in the city of Pelotas.

Can be affiliated to the CPERS/Sindicato "the teachers, specialists in education and school personnel, and from the other bodies of the State School System, who are civil servants of the State of Rio Grande do Sul" (CPERS/Sindicato, 1994, p. 2). The school personnel were included in this list in March 1990 (Bulhões; Abreu, 1992).

Since the Statutory Reform of 1994, the Union's governing bodies are the Managing Board and the General Council. The former has the following positions: president, 1st vice-president, 2nd vice-president, secretary general, accountant general, and ten other directors whose attributions are defined by the Managing Board. The General Council is composed by the Managing Board, managers of Regional Centers, one representative for every 1000 members of each Center, two state representatives of the retired members, and representatives of the CPERS/Sindicato at the CNTE Council of Bodies.

The Centers have a Board of Directors and a Council, the former being composed of

<sup>5</sup> In Portuguese *Coordenadorias Regionais de Educação* (CREs).

a general director, a vice-director, a secretary, an accountant, and five more directors with functions defined by the Board of Directors of the Center. The latter body is composed by the Board of Directors of the Center, representatives of schools on the basis of one representative per school or body of the state school system, plus one representative for every 50 associates, two representatives of the retired members of the Center, one representative of the Municipality, and one representative for every 1000 members of the Center.

This form of organization tries to implement a bottom-up representation, having in mind that, firstly, although elections for the Board of Directors of the CPERS/Sindicato, for the Boards of Directors of the Centers, and for the one-per-one-thousand representatives are based on slates, they have no direct link between them; secondly, elections for the representatives of the schools are carried out at each school or workplace, meaning that different political groups can be represented at any instant of time at different levels of management.

Until 2000 the CPERS/Sindicato had 85,361 associates, 75,920 of them teachers (see Table I). These figures suggest a high incidence of membership, although it may be difficult to offer precise numbers for the membership-category population ratio, when we take into account that such population must include both active and retired teachers. To give an idea of the problem, data from the same year indicate that, from the total number of associates, 48% (36,447) are retired, and 52% (39,473) are active teachers (see Table II). Also, numbers presented by the SEE-RS (Rio Grande do Sul State Secretariat for Education) regarding the teaching staff of the state public

**Tabela I: Total de sócios (até 11.04.2000)**

<b>Nº de docentes</b>	75.920	89%
<b>Nº de funcionários</b>	9.441	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>85.361</b>	<b>100%</b>

Fonte: CPERS/SINDICATO – Depto de Processamento de Dados.

**Tabela II: nº de sócios docentes aposentados\* versus nº de sócios docentes na ativa (até 20.11.2000)**

<b>Nº de docentes aposentados</b>	<b>36.447</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>Nº de docentes na ativa</b>	<b>39.473</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>75.920</b>	<b>100%</b>

Fonte: CPERS/SINDICATO – Depto de Processamento de Dados. education system are based on data-gathering criteria different from those used by the CPERS, for they refer to registrations, that is, the same teacher may be counted twice if he/she occupies more than one position (say, one 20hr/week position, and one 40hr/week position).

At any rate, what I would like to emphasize here is the representativeness of the CPERS, not just because of the number of its associates, but also because it is an organization that has managed for six decades to mobilize the teachers of the state public system for wide social struggles, as well as to negotiate with the State on behalf of the teaching category in wage- and career-related issues. Moreover, it has brought into its ranks other social segments with a view to unifying forces. If the inclusion of these categories – such as the school personnel – plays a role that is more numerical than ideological, or if there is consensus about the suitability of this decision, are questions to which the answers do not seem to be clear, as we shall see below.

### **Unionization and identity: workers in Education?**

The objective of this section is to expound the conceptions presented by active members of a union of workers in Education about the connections between unionization and teacher identity. The issue here is, therefore, to verify if the positions stated by the teachers can somehow be approximated by possible hypotheses, for example, that unionization is a response to a process of proletarianization, in other words, the recognition that the teaching category is deprived

of parts of its professional activity, lacking the necessary autonomy to plan and execute their tasks, and its parallel organization in mass collectives. Thus, the central issue here is to investigate how those involved in the study define the members of the teaching category when stating or conceptualizing what a worker in Education is.

As we have seen so far, some authors describe the creation of union-like teacher organizations as the outcome of a process of identification of the teachers with other exploited segments of society. The conscience of (capitalist) exploitation and (political) oppression leads to a universalistic alternative for organization: the unions.

Notwithstanding that, the most significant aspect of the impressions gathered from CPERS members regarding this subject is the existence of a multiplicity of positions about it, even within the group studied, which was composed of experienced and renowned activists. This is what we shall discuss now.

### **First group: State-level managers**

Underlying the positions of the interviewees, one could foresee, *a priori*, the existence of ideas coming from the program of the institution and/or from discussions carried out within the various levels of the organization. However, if anything, the concept of 'worker in Education' was conspicuous by its absence: none of the eight subjects from the first group worked with the idea of proletarianization as the loss of autonomy in the work process, a definition presented by authors dealing with the theme (Apple, 1987; Fernández Enguita, 1991). When discussing the alleged phenomenon of teacher proletarianization, which would have brought the category closer to the rest of the workers, they did not address the nature of the teacher work, its division, the multiplication of tasks etc. They kept to issues of a more ideological character, and indicated aspects that can be more readily identified as results of a proletarianization process; consequences, not causes; fraught with worries,

mainly about salaries and the need to improve the career prospects of their affiliates.

On the other hand, this does not reveal plain ignorance or lack of analysis of the situation of teachers. Firstly, because the members of the union are also people who share representations about their occupations, and considering that they have varied political and ideological hues, it is to be expected that their interpretations will be varied and not necessarily associated to the academic view of the phenomenon. Secondly, because the analyses of the situation of teacher work must be carried out having in mind the historical configurations that have characterized it, and this is something that each of our interviewees does, that is, to insert his/her interpretation in history and rescue the specificity of the contexts experienced by the category.

It is interesting to observe to what extent the divergences touch the nucleus of the 'professional *versus* proletarian' issue, but in the realm of ideological dispute, mixing *position* with *class* identity. Let us then examine the arguments employed by the subjects.

We can divide the eight interviewees into two categories: those who affirm that the teacher category can be classified as a category of proletarianized workers, and those who disagree from that.

Focusing on the former group, there are two possibilities. First, there are those who are not happy with the proletarians *versus* professionals dichotomy, adding that "*things are much harder to define than this simplification between bourgeoisie and proletarians*", apparently associating the concept of professional with that of bourgeoisie. This interviewee defines a proletarian as "someone from the lower classes who sells his/her workforce for a salary", and by such definition includes teachers in this category. Here, the reference for the analysis is the class position (incidentally, several interviewees make reference to this aspect). On the other hand, in a less precise fashion, the interviewee says that "[...] our category is a professional category insofar as it strives to work

in the best possible way within its field of competence”.

Second, taking as a reference the issue of identity, there are those who argue that the teacher category regard themselves as workers because this would correspond to “left-wing traits” typical of this category, linked to the idea of their intellectual work: “[...] we are workers with a role to play, with a function within the intellectual area, but we are workers, and this identification exists today within the category”.

Those who disagree with the proletarian identity use arguments mainly of a cultural order. We have found those who are disgusted at the thought of teachers being regarded as workers, alleging that attempting such profile change is neither *appropriate* (does not correspond to reality) nor *assimilated* by the category, that is to say, the category has never had any identity with workers. It should perhaps be mentioned that this position sounds a little misplaced coming from a union leader.

There are, on the other hand, those who refer to the *conservative character* of teachers to explain their lack of enthusiasm to refer to themselves as workers. A variation of this argument is put forward by those who try to understand the motives that prevent teachers from identifying with workers, including here the manipulation of subjectivities by the governments:

[...] the dichotomic experience of being from an elite, and at the same time I'm a worker that sometimes earns less than a housemaid [...] But when they say that I'm a noble teacher it's good for my ego; in a certain way it rescues the reasons that led me to choose this profession, because it was never about the money, I came because I loved this work, education [...]

### **Second group: grass-roots activists**

Considering that the second group studied was composed of people with less political

experience and a less clear ideological definition, the approach to the theme was different, asking them what the reason was for their *personal participation* in union activities. The vast majority indicated as an answer the organization of the category in its demands for rights, presenting a reason of solidarity for their participation, as we can apprehend from this answer: “[...] the need for union and organization of the category to increase its strength to demand all the things we need and are entitled to”.

Other motives presented were of a more ideological nature, concerned with social transformation, and even struggle for the quality of education, as in this testimony: “to be engaged in the construction of a better world, full of happiness and citizenship”; and “to fight against the exploitation, alienation and subservience”.

There are also reasons of an instrumental nature: “my entire professional life has been followed by the union. I have always been answered in my queries”; this expresses certain gratitude and, consequently, the wish to keep the relationship for a solidary reason.

In any case, we should not take these statements as ideal types that do not relate to each other, considering that the same persons can have reasons of different characters. The articulation between instrumental and solidary motives is evident, just as it is easy to notice that the comments do not deal with aspects related to changes in the organization of the teaching work and their consequences to the pedagogical activity proper.

### **Third group: intermediate direction**

Lastly, as to the third group of interviewees, certain uniformity is perceptible in their perspectives about the possible articulations between unionization and identity, considering also that they all belonged to the same union political stream. The issue was investigated under the same two approaches.

In the first approach, we tried to follow the approximation of the interviewees to the

union. Notwithstanding gender differences, which indicate different trajectories for men and women, there are similarities with respect to their interest and insertion in union activities, that is, they are passionate about their experience. The issues of ideological and solidary natures relate to each other, with the women's narratives showing the beginning of their participation occurring for solidary reasons, whereas for the men more ideological motives can be identified.

The second approach was implemented through a more direct question as to the motives that lead people in general to join the CPERS.

Three main aspects should be noted regarding this last approach. One of them is evident, for it refers to persuading the subjects of the importance of union activity. This implies bringing back the role of the union as an agent that works toward improving the situation of the category and the quality of education: in short, it is about improving society. All subjects were emphatic about this, and some of them try to make it particularly clear that, as workers in the public service, they have a duty to serve the population well, and that is the reason why they organize and make demands, although this is a conviction they acquired 'along the way'. This type of perspective comes close to the idea of a universal class subject, while keeping similarities with the image of State employees as indicated by Nóvoa.

A second aspect refers to the meaning of their self-identification as "workers in Education", especially after the inclusion in the union of other school personnel. Although this movement of inclusion has already been dealt with institutionally, considering that it is more than ten years old, the references to it still lack homogeneity. The divergences of conceptions found among the union managers of the first group cannot be seen here, but simply a lack of consideration of the issue. Only one teacher, apart from the non-teaching worker, refers explicitly to the phrase 'workers in Education'. All the other teachers failed to bring up the

subject, turning their attention to the teaching activity and to the specificity of the work they carry out, such as the pedagogical relations and the teaching for citizenship.

The teachers talk about this issue when they affirm the need to avoid corporatism in order to fight common battles and keep advancing. Their arguments do, however, reveal some uneasiness and resistance within the category as to their identification as workers in Education.

Sometimes I hear someone say 'Oh, now, can you imagine us marching with the landless in Porto Alegre, as we did several times, and the landless were there with us, they are workers too'. Someone else says: 'Now, this story the CPERS has come up with of worker in Education, we are teachers, ok, we're teachers, but who is the teacher? He is a worker, isn't it, so the union shows us that sometimes, and it's not once in a while, we have to have this collective view of the worker, isn't it, the struggle is of the workers, isn't it, it can be a rural worker, a worker in...the industry, in the commerce, they're all workers just like we are, isn't it, just like us teachers.'

The only member of the board who is not a teacher is more vehement, using a major part of her speech to clarify the situation of her group within the union, and the relation it keeps with the State. She criticizes the lack of identification of the teaching category with the phrase 'workers in Education', saying that there are teachers, mainly male, that do not admit being so referred to:

[...] a male teacher once told me this: 'How come you call me a worker in Education? I studied so hard, I graduated from a college, how can I be called a worker?'

This aspect also refers to the feeling of exclusion that takes over non-teaching personnel

when agents such as the press ignore this segment in their references to the CPERS/Sindicato, reiterating what has been said about the uneasiness of the category about this issue, although teachers affirm that the managing levels and other union activists are convinced that the integration of the segments was the right move.

The last aspect reflects a degree of disappointment with the low interest displayed by the teachers in the work carried out by the union. The subjects reflect this when they mention the motives that make the 'workers in Education' join the union, emphasizing those of an instrumental character, and admitting with some dejection that the motivation often reduces to this, that is, to the wish to obtain immediate, albeit just, advantages. The speech below serves as an example:

I go there and I join the union, I pay that little fee, that ridiculously small monthly fee, and I have someone to fight for me, and I forget that this is a struggle of a category, of a class, it's all about union, about the more people join the struggle, the stronger you get, but people don't have this view, most people don't have this view.

The issue of *participation*, in its broader sense, is also hinted at: people want to participate in "*congresses*", in "*courses*", "*they want to get out a bit, learn new things*". However, only one of the teachers presented the three types of motives – solidary, instrumental, and ideological:

People have various reasons, there are people who have told me that they think the CPERS is so beautiful, with those huge events, that today don't even exist anymore, of putting twenty thousand people in a stadium, of taking to the streets, so the moment they pass the State career entry exam, they look for the union to get their CPERS ID. There's this other kind of teacher that just wants to know about his rights, he's always looking at his

own navel, his rights, you know; and there's this other kind of teacher who believes in the struggle, who believes that through a union we can move forward, you know, so he gets in by his idealism, to improve education, to improve schools, salaries, everything, all those things we have been struggling for for so many years.

Finally, we can verify through the manifestations of the subjects that, although they feel that few people effectively share their perspective, classified by an interviewee as 'idealism', they do not intend to give up their efforts, as one teacher wants to make clear:

[...] this utopia I have... this wish of building a better world, more humane, more fraternal, with no discriminations of gender, race or religion, it's a challenge that's still up [...]

### **Closing remarks**

The main purpose of this article was to problematize some of the meanings attributed to teacher identity considering teachers' self-image as professionals or proletarians. The results, obtained after the analysis of the perceptions of members of the unions of workers in Education, seem to indicate that there is no single answer or definite position about this polarization. As we could see, even among those who work daily in an organization conceived along the lines of proletarianized workers' associations, there is no consensus. The ambiguity is noticeable both in the inclusion of the teachers in one category or the other – professionals or proletarians – and in the choice of arguments to define the kind of identity they defend.

Before moving on, it must be said that the term 'identity' is being used here in a wide sense: the characteristics that shape human beings, but which are, as already said, neither static nor essential, being constructed and reconstructed throughout their lives. Thus, with

respect to the sphere of the representations they make of their own work, each individual and society as a whole qualify what it means to occupy a certain work post, albeit in diverse or contradictory manners. In my view, adopting this perspective of analysis allows us to steer clear of a functionalist conception of occupation, which would just list the characteristics of a profession as definitive and ahistorical (Popkewitz, 1994).

The images and self-images of the masters – to paraphrase Arroyo (2002) – have been changing throughout the history of the office of teaching. The proletarian identity is one of these images, expressing the contradictions experienced by the teaching category at the present moment. It is a contradictory movement because, when the teachers perceive their shrinking field of activity, enclosed between their divided – but not shared – attributions, multiplication of intermediate tasks, and salary reductions, they resist in two different ways: they demand ‘professionalization’, and they stimulate organizations created in the image of manual workers’ associations. It must be stressed that proletarianization is not synonymous with low salaries: the latter are a consequence of the former. Proletarianization is synonymous with loss of autonomy at work. Now, here we find a paradoxical situation, because the introduction of major regulations to the teaching work, that is, of proletarianization, has been justified as a manifestation of the process of technical professionalization of teaching on the part of the organizations (State, employers). This paradox is a challenge to the action of teaching associations: how to develop notions of professionalism and qualification differentiated from the institutional notions?

On this point, Valle argues that the search for professionalization on the part of the teachers

[...] neutralizes – or nullifies – the *negative identity* that associates the teaching activity

to the domestic chores. Teaching acquires the status of a profession, and ceases to be seen as a sub-profession, pseudo-profession, semi-profession, secondary profession, supplementary or marginal. (2002, p. 215)

However, how to accommodate this wish alongside the other identification announced, that of ‘workers in education’?

To attribute this concept to the entire group of people that work in the education area, in some systems/levels of teaching, seems to be another option not shared by all. Although made official in the statutes of the ‘teachers’ unions – which, therefore, are no longer only of teachers, but still retain this denomination – this is not consensual among teachers, not even within the managing levels of the unions.

In Brazil, another facet of this process has been the affiliation of the unions to the CUT, which in some cases turned into a painful and severely disputed development. Bulhões; Abreu (1992) describe the outbreak of this rift within CPERS/Sindicato, which started its official transformation into a union in 1989, becoming affiliated to CUT only in 1996.

The problem can, however, be even more complex than that. Non-teaching personnel constitute a much smaller category, with reduced power – in right and in fact – considering that the functions they perform are usually characterized by the absence of institutional relation with the knowledge, which is the main object of work in schools. In fact, it is more like they were absorbed into the teaching category, and not the other way around, as the title ‘workers in education’ would seem to suggest. In other words, it is the nature of the teaching work that seems to govern the identity of the unionized ‘workers in education’, the things that those in charge of the more complex tasks do, and wherefrom they acquire greater influence in the management of education. For this reason, I believe that

researching the relations between teachers and non-teaching personnel at schools constitutes a rich course of analysis.

Another significant problem that must continue to be investigated refers to the occupational identity of the teachers, especially of the younger ones, more recently attracted to the profession. Several works mention the modification of teacher identities in current times. To Birgin; Duschatzky; Dussel (1998), something of the image of the redeeming teacher survives, but the notion of vocation as central to the category is modified, and it is also clear that the teachers nowadays have a different socio-cultural profile. Dubet; Martuccelli (1998) help to understand this phenomenon by differentiating *status identification* from *occupation identification*. Apparently, the teaching category suffers more with respect to their social status, because the social construction about what concerns the teaching task seems to persist in the discourses about that.

Arroyo goes a step further and puts forward two questions that I would like to examine. Continuing the analyses presented in a text already mentioned here, he starts from the need displayed by the teaching category to place itself as part of a 'professional culture', of a 'identitary culture'. To this purpose, he outlines the trajectory followed by the category, bringing to the forefront the coexistence of different identities. It is worthwhile to reproduce here parts of his argument:

Since the late seventies, they try to identify themselves before society as workers in education. We could see in this gesture just a strategy in the struggle for better salaries, career, stability, and even a justification to employ the same methods of struggle learned from the labor movements, strikes, protests, street demonstrations. We could

also see in the identification with workers a call for backup from the union centrals. We could see more than that. An aspect that could be emphasized here is the teachers' perception of the need to incorporate social recognition, a collective identity that has always been denied to them (2002, p. 190)

Notwithstanding that, the author is not condescending when questioning the identification of the teaching category with the needs and interests of students and their families:

Proclaiming that teachers are workers in education has signified being incorporated into this work culture accumulated after so many struggles of the working class? Has it aggregated new features to the disfigured image of the school master? Do they recognize themselves as workers when they are not on strike? Have they identified themselves more with the values and cultural heritage of the working class? Do they see themselves as workers, or has this added feature made their image more confused to themselves? Will it be sufficient to affirm a new professional culture? (Arroyo, 2002, p. 190)

His answer seems to be "not necessarily", and we can make use of two of his reflections, among others, to move forward from here. First, if it would not be important to think about the identification as workers more as the struggle for rights and for an ethics – and not so much for a manual worker profile. Second, if there is a struggle for certain beliefs, it would be fitting to examine if, contradictorily, many of the classroom daily practices, away from the mobilizing activities, do not simply reproduce inequalities, turning away from the worldviews of the groups that are in the school, particularly the public school.

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