

TEACHERS, a fragile link in the education chain

A REPORT BY FLÁVIO DIEGUEZ



Teacher from the public education network writes on the blackboard during a class in a school in São Paulo.

AT THIS MOMENT, when the debate on education in Brazil has become more relevant, it seems appropriate to call the attention to the teachers – who are, as a principle, a central element of an education system. Beginning with the most basic aspects, which are the working and life conditions of those practitioners. In São Paulo, the teachers themselves took the initiative to become a subject of debate when they presented, as part of the category's wage campaign, several demands and some data on their situation. The data is particularly valuable, since there is a surprising lack of information about the teachers – and those available lead us to believe that their situation is not simple and would deserve more attention than it seems to be receiving.

In the last thirty years, for example, the Elementary School teachers' wage, in the state public network, underwent a systematic decline until it reached a minimum level, which corresponds to less than one-third of the

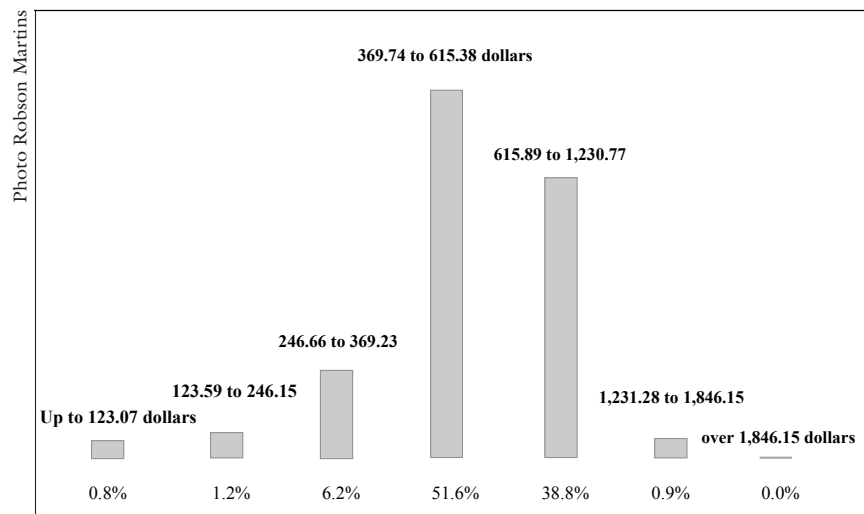
category's minimum wage in March 1979. Except for two short periods – between 1985 and 1988, and between 1995 and 1998, during which the wage retained and even recovered a fraction of its buying power –, the fall was steady, only delayed from time to time by means of readjustments which, having run out quickly, returned to the declining pattern. The movement is consistent, and it would be too simple to think that the teachers' low wage level reflects only an economic circumstance, a transitory situation. In fact, it indicates life and working conditions that declined due to a long neglect process towards education – including from the point of view of the category's wage.

This report attempts, as far as possible, to draw a concrete outline of those practitioners' current situation by hearing the teachers themselves. Thus, thirteen elementary school teachers in the city of São Paulo were interviewed, most of whom from the São Paulo state education network, as well as school directors, supervisors and some union leaders of the education area. The information obtained in the interviews was complemented with statistics gathered by Dieese, which mainly supplied a recently disclosed survey carried out together with Apeoesp, the Union of Teachers Employed by the State of São Paulo. Even though it is not a reliable picture of the teacher category – the data was gathered within a limited universe, among 2,200 participants of a Union meeting in Santos, in 2003 –, that survey is very helpful in terms of the perception of the teachers' conditions since, besides income, it gathered information on many other aspects, health being the most important of them.

Even from the wage point of view, a strictly quantitative datum, and within the limited scope of São Paulo State, the available information is sparse. The evolution of the buying power, calculated according to the minimum wage, has a reduced information value and it is hard to know the teachers' real average income, even because wages vary a lot, depending on several factors, such as: the career time of each teacher, if he or she has a college degree or not, the function he or she exercises in the mastership and the bonuses to which he or she is entitled. In the case of the survey mentioned above, it can be observed that the most common income range, comprising 49% of those interviewed, varies between 615.38 and 1,230.77 dollars.¹ The second most common range (24% of those who answered) varies between 369.23 and 615.38 dollars. That indicates an average income of about 769.23 dollars. Informally, based only on their experience, Dieese's technical staff adds some details. It estimates that, today, the summit of the career is not much higher than 1,538.46 dollars, and that if a teacher who starts in the lowest level of the scale, earning the minimum wage of 469.23 dollars doesn't change to another function, for example, becoming a supervisor or a director, he or she will reach no more than 692.30 dollars.

“That evolution means working more hours, moving from the minimum load of 24 hours to 40 hours per week and accumulating degrees”,

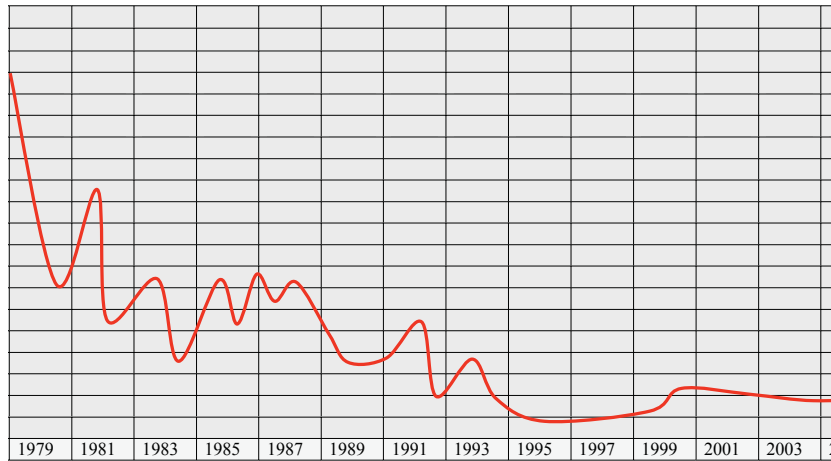
explains economist Alexandre Ferraz, from Dieese. Teachers without a college degree, for example, may increase their income if they are able to graduate, as did one of the teachers interviewed by *Estudos Avançados*. Maria das Graças (pen name used to respect the demand of several people interviewed not to be identified) has a load of 30 hours per week in a school in the West side of São Paulo and she claims that she earns 897.43 dollars per month, after an 18 year career. That is the gross value. The net value would be 692.30 dollars. In order to try to improve her income, Maria das Graças decided to attend a two-year normal college course, taught at a distance for “in class” teachers, in other words, for those who already work in the area. But now she is uncertain: she heard from fellow teachers that, in her case, the certificate might not mean more than a 5% increase in her wage.



Source: Dieese-Apeoesp (survey among the participants of a union meeting).

Figure 1 – Very low wages: most earn less than 615.38 dollars.

“If I knew that, I would not have enrolled since the university cost about 153.85 or 179.49 dollars from the budget. That is too much for me.” Born in Fortaleza, Ceará, she has been living in São Paulo for 18 years, she is divorced and lives with two children, a twin couple who is almost 17 years old. They study on a public school and do not work. The three of them live in an apartment with one living room and one bedroom that costs 153.85 dollars per month. Since she does not have a car and lives relatively close to the school where she teaches, Maria das Graças goes to work on foot: “We are filthy, uncombed, but healthy. I only take a bus when there is no other way”. As all other teachers interviewed by *Estudos Avançados*, she owns most of the common appliances, the standard *kit*, bought “in light installments”, including freezer, computer and dial-up Internet (low speed, without broadband). When she can, she travels on vacation to Praia Grande (in the seashore of São Paulo



Source: Dieese.

Graph 1 – Teachers’ buying power ends 2005 three times lower than in 1979 (percentage comparison: 1979 = 100%).

State), “at the bank’s limit”. She has already resorted to two loans. One of them, that she is about to settle, was made so she could attend the normal course. The other one was to free herself from the overdraft protection funds.

Even with extra expenses with one of the children, who is diabetic, and with the help she sends to her father, an alcoholic, in Fortaleza, she says she cannot even think about asking her husband for an allowance: “Since he went back to Ceará he could not find another job, and if I asked him it would be just another stress”.



Picture by Robson Martins

March by teachers of the public education network for better wages, in São Paulo

Stressed category

The tone of voice with which Maria das Graças says that word is significant because stress seems to have become inherent to the teachers' life in recent years. The survey carried out by Dieese-Apeoesp shows that half of the people interviewed have a diagnosis of the disease and that number is aggravated by the fact that, in addition, one-fourth of the category suffers from depression. The authors write in the comment to that item, in the survey's text, that the International Labor Organization, which is tied to the United Nations Organization (UNO), acknowledges stress as an occupational disease. Studies carried out in several countries indicated that it is more frequent among teachers than in the average of the population. It is also considered that the constant subjection to stress would cause other disorders, both psychic and physical. In the study made by Dieese-Apeoesp, for example, over 80% of the teachers who suffer from depression also claimed they have stress, which indicates that one causes the other. And there are several other similar diseases: nervousness, anxiety, forgetfulness, muscle pains, anguish, and insomnia. That list gathers the most prevalent diseases, claimed by over 35% of the people interviewed.

What afflicts the teacher?

Marina, who deals with a considerable amount of stress with a smile on her face – teaching in the border of São Paulo's Southern zone, a troubled region, close to Parelheiros neighborhood–, thinks she knows the answer: “There is a lot of hurry, of neurosis. There is no time to have lunch”.

I know many teachers. They are always rushing from one school to another, seeking a way to improve. Improve the wage, having a less anguishing live. Two months ago a teacher I know died inside her classroom. She had a fulminating heart attack. I don't know the cause, but things happen that way.

Marina doesn't have any problem of that nature. She claims that teaching excites her: “But in the public service it makes you tired and stressed and if you have to face a periphery, you end up breathing dust and spitting bricks”. In her opinion, the boys in the periphery are hyperactive and, in one way or another, they are always involved with violence and drugs: “Without a very solid support by the education system, work becomes almost impossible”. According to what she believes, it is not that the teacher cannot take the initiative by him or herself: “I think that, in general, teachers must review the traditional view about what it means to teach”. “You must see the students' world from their point of view and try to create a good relationship.”

Marina is also not afraid of the periphery, where she has already taught at night (now she only teaches in the morning and in the afternoon). So much so that she currently devotes part of her time to social and educational

projects, developed by NGOs, which concentrate their efforts precisely in the most conflagrated regions of the city of São Paulo:

“This is not about the wage. I am actually looking for an occupation that provides me with a greater professional satisfaction perspective”. She earns, in an NGO, 1,025.64 dollars for thirty working hours per week, roughly the same as she earns in two public schools – 492.30 dollars in one of them and 512.82 dollars in another one – for eighteen working hours per week. Until last year, she taught 32 hours per week, but she is stepping out so she can devote more time to the social and educational projects.

Across town, Maria Célia – also in a risk area –, this time in the Eastern zone, shares with Marina the love for working with vulnerable youngsters: “Someone might say ‘That woman is crazy’, but I enjoy that moment [the class], even with that flagrant reality”. She has been teaching in the state educational network for fourteen years and she prefers to be pressed for money than to leave the classroom, for example, to take over an administrative function that paid more. “It is a very gratifying job”, she claims. Although it is not few: six hours of classes per day in two schools, in the afternoon and in the evening, as well as four hours in an NGO. Her net earning is 615.38 dollars in the schools and 410.26 dollars in the NGO: “It is too much work because real life suffers. I see my [15 year old] son when I can”. She is divorced, says that she is paying for her car, for the computer and for a DVD and that she lives in the back of her mother’s house: “Last year I tried to buy a house in the self-owned house sale. But I could not find any that fit my budget and this year I did not even go to see”. A mathematician, without any pedagogical background, Maria Célia believes that the education system is stressful because it does not learn with the reality of poverty: “Many fellow teachers get discouraged”.

Mariana thinks more or less in the same way: she also thinks that teaching is tiring. It was because she was tired that, even with a minimum load of 24 hours per week in a school of the Eastern zone, a few months ago she preferred to reduce the amount of extra work that she did as a complement (she paints and teaches private lessons, “mainly during vacations”). She remained only with the wage of 564.10 dollars, which she considers to be “reasonable”. But it is back and forth: now, with her husband already away from his job but yet to receive his retirement, she says she is starting to think about increasing her load in the school from 24 to 30 hours: “Before I did not think it was very good, but, since things are getting tighter, I think it is necessary, because the income would have a sharp increase”.

She says that she must devote much time at home to prepare the lessons – besides the compensated time, included in the wage for that purpose. In her opinion, classes are tiring mainly due to the profile of the students.

Most of them are very poor and start to work very young imposed by their parents, who make the children sell candy in the street, leaving them exposed

to violence. It is common for the father, the mother or for both of them to be in jail. So you make the children dream, but as soon as they leave the classroom, they go back to their reality. It is about starting over everyday.

Mariana believes that the hard part is not about the children themselves.

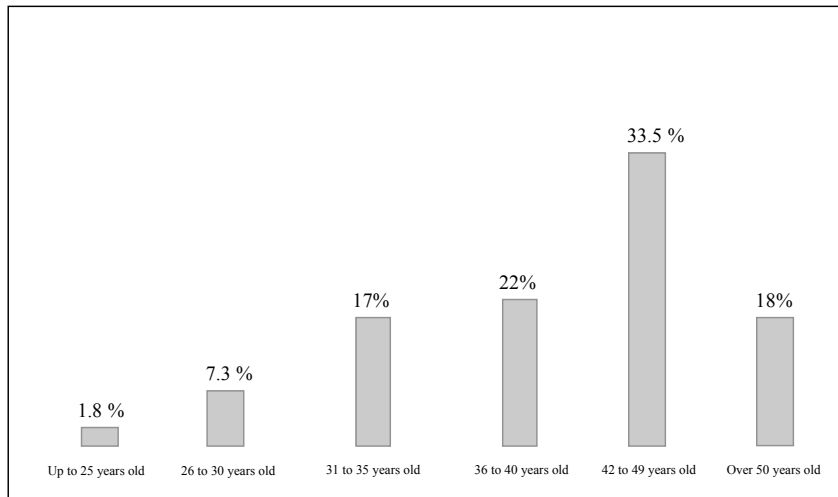
I don't have any problem. But you must be very careful. You must prepare yourself very well. You must use your time searching for support material, such as texts from newspapers and magazines, try to arrange access for them in computers and in the Internet, which the school cannot provide. And since he or she is not always successful, it is hard to find a teacher who does not have any problem. Alone, he or she cannot make it happen.

She says that she has already had depression and panic syndrome, which cost her almost two years of treatment, adding up all the periods of medical leave: "I thought I had to find a way out for myself, and I did what I could have done. And I still do because I like what I do. I would like to teach as long as I can resist".

Aging teachers

Those testimonies, and several others that have not been mentioned here, illustrate many of the information that show up in the survey carried out by Dieese-Apeoesp, in which over 70% of the people interviewed ascribed their difficulties to the fact that the classrooms are so crowded. According to them, nowadays most classrooms have over forty students, while thirty would be the number recommended by international institutions, such as Unesco. That information appears in other surveys, both in São Paulo and in other Brazilian cities, according to the authors of the study by Dieese-Apeoesp. And they claim that in one of them – *When official data reveal working conditions*, carried out in the city of São Paulo – 97% answered that the excessive number of students was annoying.

And full classrooms are not the only source of anguish. In the survey carried out by Dieese-Apeoesp, the following causes are pointed out by over 50% of the teachers: learning difficulty by the students, violence at school, social situation of the students, excessive working hours, lack of didactic material and inadequate curriculum. About those last items, and according to the interviews made by *Estudos Avançados*, it is interesting to mention a survey, developed by experienced practitioners, with long educational existence, synthesized by psychologist Margarida Gioielli, psychopedagogical coordinator of the Labor Educational Association. She was aided by technicians from Labor itself and by several teachers, students and directors of the public network both in the state and in the city of São Paulo.



Source: Dieese-Apeoesp (survey among participants of union meeting)

Figure 3 – Most of the teachers are over 35 years old.

Those are two impressions that are not compatible with one another. And they strengthen the feeling that there would be no easy solution for a context such as the one that the available information seems to reveal.

Probably, the low wages alone do not represent the teacher's real working and life conditions, although it is reasonable to believe that the buying power synthesizes, in a certain way, the social position of a category. Maybe for that reason, one of the claims they make in the current wage campaign is a higher minimum wage: they request that the 469.23 dollars rise to 767.18 dollars (strictly speaking, the so-called base-wage corresponds to 342.56 dollars, but it rises to 469.23 when the several gratifications are incorporated; due to the absence of adequate rises, as time went on they were included in the wage). The value that the teachers ask for, of 767.18 dollars, is what is considered to be the minimum necessary to meet the needs of a family in Brazil, according to a calculation made by Dieese.

In the same way, it could be wished that the category's wage occasionally tripled – which is more or less what would be necessary to recover the value that wages had in 1979, according to Dieese. More precisely, they would have to be readjusted in 242%, the equivalent to multiplying the current minimum wage of 469.49 dollars by 3.4223 and reach 1,601.60 dollars, which corresponds to the value of the minimum wage thirty years ago. If it was fully recovered it would give back to the category the income it lost. But what is still lacking is a clearer acknowledgement about the relevant social role that teachers play in Brazil.

Note

- 1 The exchange rate used in the conversion of reais into dollars (R\$1,95/dollar) refers to September 04, 2007.

When children learn on their own

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A certain passion for teaching and the assurance that it is possible to teach better are two characteristics often found in Brazil, and that often yield a greater result than it could be expected, considering the circumstances. An example of that is the Amorim Lima Project, currently being consolidated in the municipal school with the same name, in Butantã neighborhood, São Paulo. Eleven years ago, it was a common school with most of the common difficulties of many Brazilian schools: it had a worn out internal structure, made up of many tired practitioners and a management overloaded by difficulties that were not solved, expressed mainly by a high rate of school flight. Today, many of the difficulties that occurred then still exist. But for those who see it from the outside, as a visitor, the school is definitely anything but conventional.

For example, there are no more “classrooms”, at least in its common and traditional sense. They were substituted for furnished halls with several tables in which, in groups of six in each table, the students study almost on their own, working on topics established beforehand by the school. There are also no more teachers as people used to know them, each one with his or her own class of students, because at Amorim Lima School the set of students became the responsibility of the set of teachers.

In the same way that there is no more teacher of the kind that teaches Math or Geography or Portuguese, the old isolated subjects there used to be. All the topics – the study object of the students – are transversal, or multidisciplinary, including and integrating varied knowledge. The school doors are always open, both on weekdays and on weekends, and inside it learning take various shapes: theater organized by students’ mothers, *capoeira*, Guarani lessons, architecture, circus, and student making citizenship decisions.

Judging from the testimony of the current director, Ana Elisa Siqueira, the result is still being discussed:

We had and still have a lot to do. From the beginning we had to overcome the teachers’ resistance to the changes, and some of them changed schools. Some of the others, among those that remained, are not very willing, even because they have to broaden their knowledge due to the transversal disciplines. In the same way, since some parents did not agree with the changes, they transferred their children to other schools. Those were very few, but it did happen.

Despite that, Ana Elisa considers the new school a success:

We were able to create a new way of teaching and school attendance got better. According to an evaluation seminar we made, last year the students’ attendance to classes has been almost full and teachers’ absence has gone down. Besides, in a matter that is very important for the project, we have had a great involvement of the

community, with high attendance of the parents to the meetings. The fact that the project rouses much curiosity outside the school is also very important. Today we receive contributions from several voluntary collaborators, pedagogues and other practitioners interested in education.

Does a teacher have the right to be absent?

Ana Elisa says she got to know the school when she was a pedagogical coordinator in Butantã, when Luiza Erundina was the mayor: “The school was located in a heterogeneous community, and I noticed the possibility to stimulate the community’s participation. I fell in love with it. Erundina had left us a great teaching profession statute, which said that the educator can make decisions; not only the principal”. She says that the keynote of the faculty at that time (she became principal in 1996), was a monotonous and useless saying: it was all about “problematical students”. She says that that her office door was a permanent line of students waiting to be scolded: “I do not know how I resisted”. This Indian wrestling lasted for six years, and the changes were gradual, starting with an effort to attract the community to the school. Ana Elisa took the mothers to decide what they could do and they started to help taking care of the children during recess. But it was not only to “be on the lookout”. It was decided that they would take over activities related to teaching, participating on debates. The initial theme was: what is the function of education? “Later, gradually, the parents started to turn the debate more politicized. They started to ask if the teachers had the right to be absent. Therefore, pressure came from the outside to the inside”,

the principal summarizes. Nowadays, almost everything that is done in the school has a collegiate character: there is a school council, a pedagogical council, a management council, a student assembly and other equivalent entities. Decision is always collective, debated, and has the power of the collegiate body to ensure its application. “The Idea here is: everybody works together”, says Ana Elisa. “Physically together”, she reinforces. “In order to create the halls and to break the classroom structures, we had to literally break the walls. In the beginning, in order to break the isolation of the school within the neighborhood, an entirely gray school, we threw down the fences that hindered circulation.” The classes were also broken up and were gradually included in the new way of teaching. Until it included all the students, which today is one of the most striking aspects of the project. Thanks to the surprising role they have within the school. And not so much because they discuss and make adult decisions concerning countless internal matters, from the cleanliness of the restroom to the selective waste gathering, to the presentation of the school and to the self-attribution of accountability for their own actions. And the school would already be remarkable for that alone. But what is really remarkable is the great degree of autonomy they have in relation to their own education – since they have eight years to develop the fifteen great study themes that comprise their complete elementary education, and they can do that as they wish, full of self-esteem and free from the vicious circle of the scolding. That aspect strikes the visitor and is also what Ana Elisa points out as the great perspective for the development of the school from now on: “What I hope for is that we are able to give the children the opportunity to find themselves within this great mess called the world”.