

## Teachers' health and research: subject or object, seldom as affect\*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The article presents the construction of a strategy for research in worker's health, according to the profound desire to say, about the workers, focusing on the basic education teacher. It discusses aspects of the research that point to the subject or object of investigation, suggesting the power of affecting and being affected as a relevant opportunity of qualitative research. A level of affections is constituted more as a difference between what is lived in common and identity representations than a lived experience or a representation. The article reports part of an ongoing doctoral thesis in education, which uses narratives of teaching, supported by writing of the self, as well as life stories, in the manner of "escrevivências" ("writtenlived") and that, in an original way, appeared as "escreversões" ("writtenversions"). The referential to find the active doing of teaching comes from the activity clinic. The proposal was named as "co(m)texts of the teaching work: suffering and joy in school teaching" and has been under experimentation since 2019. The situations of affective engagement are a necessary factor to persevere in teaching; it is at this point where lies resistance and creation, but above all the ability to fight for a better and healthier school, teaching and the political construction of school education.

### Keywords

Teachers – Workers' health – Education – Working conditions – Qualitative research.

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## Introduction

The worldwide neoliberal offensive has had repercussions, increasing precarious and degrading working conditions in all countries, being sustained, primarily, in the perspectives of a minimum State and a maximum Market, which leaves the worker constantly threatened in their labor rights and vulnerable in relation to the mechanisms of protection against health risks (ANTUNES, 2018). The field of action of the health sector is not only constituted by care actions, interfaced with the social security sector and treatment or rehabilitation, being very relevant the actions of epidemiological surveillance and health surveillance oriented to the promotion and protection of health. These actions should be concerned with the living (intense) experience of work relations, where the relationship between the workers and their work, the relations engendered among the actors involved, the role developed by the work in the workers' lives, and the aspirations related to vocations, talents, and personal satisfaction, among so many factors involved with subjectivity and emotions, are.

The conservative scientific rationality aims for the neutrality of the researchers, keeping them in the condition of subjects (formulating the research question, choosing the methodology, controlling the procedures, interpreting the data, and reporting the results), and the researched in the condition of object (target, territory of study, scenario of reality, or source of information). As a deviation from this position, there are critical perspectives, placing, in an articulated manner, researcher and field, the research with commitment to the researched, said to be the real subjects of the research. Above all, the issues involving ethics in research with human beings are challenging the ways of thinking about research without preserving the dichotomy between research subjects and objects to be investigated. However, overcoming the dichotomy does not imply overcoming the dialectical pair subject and object (researcher and informants, researcher and research subjects). By operating, within the research, a level of openness to affections, the researcher loses control of the process and the investigation is designed according to the experience of "research-with" (FORTUNA; GATTO JÚNIOR; SILVA, 2018). The researchers maintain the willingness to accompany, but willing to be affected and to be a stranger to their knowledges. Researcher and researched are multiplicity of forces, not identity representations, and research can still summon new affections. In this way, the production of knowledge migrates from the explanation of reality to the construction and apprehension of a genealogy of the sensitive, which bears the mark of the researcher, but not in the function of announcing truths, but rather enunciating existing, insurgent, disassociating powers.

We therefore present a proposal of research-intervention according to the desire to summon the affections in the researcher and the researched in order to generate debate and knowledge. The method is being built in a graduate program, pursuing a doctorate in education concerning the health of basic education teachers. Health, education, and social workers, for example, constitute a very particular group of labor agents, since they work directly with the public for whom they work and whose production has a strong immaterial component. The immaterial products of care, learning, and social assistance are present in the way workers and beneficiaries interact: sharing knowledge and

information, cooperative and collaborative practices, networking, and the composition of socio-affective collectivities. Acting in state services, due to their work of superior social interest, these workers have been suffering with the decay of public services and the de-funding of social policies. Teachers' strikes are threatened by governments with the dismantling of achievements, and are used to demonstrate the need to vacate the State.

In health, education and social work, labor relations and organization gain particular expression and significantly influence the worker's health-disease process. To investigate these aspects of worker health, including its elements of resistance and creation, we must deepen our access to immaterial labor and how it operates in the dimensions of subjectivity, immateriality of products, and affective engagement. When we look into research on workers' health and choose a very particular group, the one of basic school teachers, the dimensions of immaterial labor emerge, especially those of a relational nature and that call for efforts in communication, interaction, creative imagination, and affective dedication. Among the working teachers in basic education, the active forces of subjectivation are implied, to a great extent, in the affirmation of what is healthy and in the processes of determining illness. This is a group with an intense history of absenteeism from work due to mental health issues. How can we talk about epidemiological surveillance and health surveillance in the protection of the health of the teaching worker without reaching situations of elevation or expropriation of the power of the self? The capture of our subjectivity both leads to illness and can result from illness. On the other hand, situations in which we actively construct our subjectivity increase our power to exist and, therefore, our relationship with the healthy (the promotion of health). Not being an individual process, this relationship is based on the emergence of collectives; on the convergence of caring, affective, and trusting acts; on the exposure to affections (the power to feel, exist, and network), and on the attitudes that invest affirmative forces (in the existence of each one, be it the students, each agent of the teaching work, or the school community).

Even though the precarization of the teaching work (OLIVEIRA, 2004) makes us think about the overload of exposure to illness and psychological suffering, we understand that it is necessary to access these exposures to reveal the exploitation not only of the body, which then suffers, but of the subjectivity that then agonizes between succumbing and resisting. The different contexts experienced in the school environment allow us many ways to approach the aspects related to teachers' health and its forms of expression in the work activity. By being crossed by this multiplicity of perspectives, research on the intensive (the affective force) in the teachers' work activity allows us a unique approach, enabling a better understanding of the aspects that act on the teachers' health. Many studies provide analytical subsidies about teachers' health, offering statistical information about health-disease indicators. However, exploring other ways of problematizing the issues of teacher health in relation to working conditions and school environment, as well as the relations between teacher subjectivity and school culture, can broaden the strategies of investigation and problematization.

In this article, we highlight research through the approach to the affective, using the narrative resources to ascend to work relations and relations with work. To locate

in affective experiences the memory of affection at work, but also its disruption. Work as a lived experience, but also as a revisited experience and a margin for resistance and creation (to apprehend and resist captures, favoring the construction of a collective in struggle for the health of all). We think about the activation of narratives mobilized by affections lived in the experience of absence from work due to illness or psychological suffering, revisited by insurgent affections in the emergence of a collective in interaction, able to inform-and-learn the work processes and their effects of illness and psychological suffering in bodies and subjectivities. Inform-and-learn refers to the composition of collectives of resistance to the captures of the self and of being a teacher. The recourse to narrative writing does not report only remembering, nor reliving, but re-engineering the experience of illness/suffering into a potency of resistance/existence, apprehending meanings and sensations in learning and action (finding the psychic resources that make the production of the self and of local and political resistance collectives). We present, through the interest in the health of basic education teachers, the invention of a qualitative method disposed to the affections.

## **Absence from work as an interface between health and work**

It is not known whether the medically certified leave from work due to illness and/or psychic suffering implies or involves a departure from oneself, the result of experiences such as impotence, impeded work, “bad encounters”. However, the experience of distancing from work due to illness or suffering in the agony between capture and resistance has much to say about the production of health (quality of life) and the production of existence (quality of life), about the relationship that each teacher establishes with his/her own work activity (implying the activity of the self and of the collective), as well as about the teaching self, the worker in education, and teaching.

We understand that issues involving health-disease make up a very comprehensive topic that cannot be analyzed only from a biomedical perspective, because life is remade through the establishment of new norms facing the adversities of the environment (CANGUILHEM, 2009). Based on that understanding, we report the relevance of considering the aspects that involve the comprehension of the relationships and conditions under which work is developed. Studies on teachers’ health and quality of life corroborate the unpredictability of health and illness issues. With the constant changes in their work activity – both in terms of issues related to the precariousness, devaluation, and increase in work demand, and issues related to educational policies – teachers end up building different strategies on a daily basis to better develop their work activity.

The conditions “under which teachers mobilize their physical, cognitive, and affective capacities to achieve the goals of school production can generate overstrain or hyper-solicitation of their psychophysiological functions”. Therefore, if there is no adequate time for recovery, “the clinical symptoms that explain the rates of absenteeism due to mental disorders are unleashed or precipitated” (GASPARINI; BARRETO; ASSUNÇÃO, 2005, p. 192). Although many times this situation is seen – by prejudice – as an escape of those

who simply do not want to work, as if the overload was something impregnable and intrinsic to doing teaching, its course brings different ways of coping, contemplating unique ways of feeling, living, and experiencing the situation of being away from work.

The absence from the teaching work activity, among these unique ways of feeling and experiencing it, may, in some situations, serve as a momentary escape to ease the tension or stress of the teacher, since absenteeism often constitutes a defense strategy, an attempt to ease the suffering at work (ESTEVE ZARAGOZA, 1999). The experience of absence from work due to illness or psychological suffering can be experienced as a rupture or as continuity in the ways of living. Beyond a threat of disaffiliation from that environment, being away allows the worker to “mobilize affections silenced by the normative and strenuous work routine and, then, [...] come to discover and self-discover in other skills and sensibilities” (RAMOS; TITTONI; NARDI, 2008, p. 212). However, the absence from work also represents the removal of the production of interaction, imagination and creation that characterize the affective activity of teaching.

Illness causes a previously powerful body and what was production and creation, to succumb to impotence and impossibility. Sometimes, the lack that the exercise of a desired occupation makes is ignored, as well as the affective experience of encounters, learning, and positive interactions. If, on the one hand, we can think of leaving work as a way of exploring new experiences in doing work, reinventing the activity itself, even discovering other ways of working, on the other, we can consider the frustration and the added suffering of not being able to persevere in what one enjoys doing, having sought training, acquired projection among their peers, and invested in themselves.

Researching not only the visibilities of the school universe from the teachers' point of view, but ascending to the sensitive world of the protagonists of teaching in their work activity may allow us access to the nuances, the variations, the subtleties, the delicacies; all which means revealing the strengths and intensities that only exist in the affections with the work. We propose to ascend not to the illnesses and sufferings that work causes, but to the experimentation of illness and suffering within the struggle of the worker to affirm himself, to affirm his/her work, to affirm the power of health deriving from work in the lives of his school community, that is, to locate or problematize “removal from health (illness) X removal from the production of life (capture of the power to renormalize)”. The research carried out in the school universe proposes, through teachers' texts, to reach the contexts that result in the removal of work, as well as the self-affirmation in teaching and the relief in face of the teachers' suffering.

With the aim of looking for the context with texts from teachers, we thought of a research process that deals with a sensitive listening to the suffering generated in the teaching work, in the withdrawal from school and the conditions of return, but also in the persistence with teaching. The proposal uses narratives of teaching, supported by writings of the self, as well as life stories, using the tactic of “escrevivências” (“writtenlived”, EVARISTO, 2007). The referential to find the work activity, not only what is prescribed, but the active teaching activity, comes from the activity clinic (CLOT, 2007). The idea is established in the perspective that contexts are not given, there is a movement, contexts are always giving themselves. With narrative texts, emerging from interaction, this analysis

ceases to be “representative” to gain the “expression of experiences”: writings of the self, writings with the power to affect the sensibility of those who read or listen, as well as to discomfort those who get involved or should get involved with the organization of work.

## **The referential of the activity clinic**

The term “clinic”, used in the analysis of workers’ health, refers to issues related to subjectivity in work contexts, the “subject” as the “object” of investigation. In this scope, the psychodynamics or the psychosociology of work appear. In the activity clinic, the concept of subject attributed to the worker cannot be delimited or defined without the confrontation between capture and singularization. The worker is recognized precisely in his resistance to attempts to be objectified, so there would not be a worker subject (an identity), but a field of otherness, nor an object to be described, but an activity that always escapes from being objectified (conflicts of forces). The perspective of the activity clinic makes it possible to apprehend the experience lived by the worker by placing in the becoming of the creation and invention of work.

From this perspective, the knowledge of the configurations that generate suffering broadens the understanding of the relationships and conditions under which work is developed (CLOT, 2010), as well as highlights the issues that involve the process of withdrawal. The idea is to act to know, proposing actions in those contexts in which the labor activity is separated from its power to act, since suffering at work is caused mainly by the subtraction of the worker’s power to act, and not by his/her lack of ability to face the organizational demands of work (CLOT, 2010).

The chance of producing knowledge, from information that is not usually explored in relation to the meaning of work by those who perform it, becomes an important point to be analyzed, since the reality of the activity comprises “what one does not do, what one tries to do without being successful [...], what one wishes or could have done and what one thinks he/she is capable of doing elsewhere” (CLOT, 2010, p. 103-104). From the perspective of activity clinic, in teaching, the prescribed work comprises, among other activities, what was planned for classes (including what is performed in the classroom, out-of-class activities, evaluations, meetings and other assigned assignments). The actual activity, from the prescribed activity, involves the teacher in a universe of multiple contexts, not only teaching classes. The class often occurs differently from what was planned, and sometimes it may not even be completed for a variety of reasons: related to the students, to (poor) working conditions, to the determinations of higher authorities, or unforeseen events of all kinds.

The teacher’s power to act, directly related to the search for strategies for a better development of the work activity, generates actions that help to solve problems that go from the most recurrent ones to those not so usual. It considers, therefore, the planned, the thoughtful, or even the unexpected actions, as well as those taken to remedy the multiplicity of situations that may occur in the unique contexts of each day-to-day life. The separation of the power to act can be observed when “the objectives of the action being taken are disconnected from what is really important to [the worker] and when other

valid objectives, reduced to silence, are left in stand-by" (CLOT, 2010, p. 16). Especially in teaching basic education in public schools, talking about the work impediments includes talking about that lesson planning – often carried out outside working hours – that did not materialize due to numerous reasons, whether institutional and / or external mechanisms or for reasons arising from the context of the school and out-of-school environment.

From this point on, it is possible to seek the discovery of “a new possible goal, hitherto ignored; the recognition of something else that would be achievable through and beyond what has just been realized; or the identification in the reality of unsuspected possibilities [...] whose apprehension can be made by the activity” (CLOT, 2010, p. 16). A transformation in the meaning of the activity is desired as teachers, through their narratives, contact active affections, re-signify and reconstruct their work activity, establishing new connections, rekindling professional ambitions and experiencing new emotions. The power resulting from this feeling of strength and excitement, promoted by the affections and emotions of this re-signification of the work activity itself, can find – through writing – a fertile soil for the development of new ways of seeing, feeling, and being a worker, new ways of seeing, feeling, and experiencing teaching.

The writings about oneself, about work, and about oneself at work, point out what is unique in what is lived and experienced in the work activity itself, proposing another look and bringing the teachers closer to their experiences, allowing the readers of these writings to have a closer knowledge of the reality of those who are removed from work due to illnesses that emerge from the work activity itself. By highlighting what is lived in the work experience of teachers, performing this sensitive practice through narrative writings of life and work history, we can operate in line with the activity clinic approach, which considers the unique relationship of the worker with his/her work activity, assuming that analyzing the work is beyond evaluating the workers' response to what is prescribed. Seen from the perspective of transforming to understand and not only understanding to transform, activity clinic understands that the desired transformations are only effective if carried out by the workers themselves (CLOT, 2010; CLOT; FAÏTA, 2000).

## **The referential of writtenlived as a research device**

An inspiration coming from “Escrevivências” (“Writtenlived”, EVARISTO, 2007) brought us to the formulation that the development of unique, authentic writings, marked by life experiences, can reconstitute and recompose individual histories and collective memories. The inspiring notion is the form of narrative writing. The writing experiences would lead to the awareness of a collective self that lives and struggles for life without servitude, life propelling life. The apprehension of the school context, in distinction from the original proposal, comes without any encounter with ancestral forces propelling life, but political forces composing a social group of high social interest. Through writing experiences, it is possible to re-signify oneself (from servitude to the propulsion of life) and our experiences, besides the remittance of oneself and our experiences to the political meanings that singularize a work and engender it in a better understanding of the activity and of the forces that capture the becoming of school life.

The exercise of developing teachers' writings, beyond the weaving of texts about health, work, and education, can encompass stories about the experience of the activity of the teaching work together with the marks left by this work in the experience of life, understanding the complexity implied in the life stories of teachers. It has been pointed out that the use of narratives as a methodology for studies about teaching (PASSEGGI; BARBOSA, 2008) is increasingly recurrent, due to its subjective comprehensiveness, and, in this case, intrinsic to the activity of teaching work. This process deals with accessing the "affective" world of work, obtaining visibility regarding the contexts and ways of convening the teaching experience in act, the praxis from the experience lived in the midst of their work activity.

Working activities are reproducers of history, living and finding its tools in a historical path. Therefore, in the exercise of work, the workers reveal and update themselves in the historical fabric of human culture. As bearers of a history of affections, the writing of living reveals not a work and a subject or the worker objectified by work, but the reality of life in the reality of work (the world of affections). The writtenlived belongs to the affections, so it reports the positioning that each worker took in the face of the norms with which he or she was confronted. The worker does not simply welcome the norms of work, but rather confronts them and alters them, "making choices, taking risks, making use of their preferences, their intelligence, their history and their sensitivity, recombining values and criteria in the search for an adequacy to their reality, which leads each act of work to be unique from worker to worker" (HOLZ; BIANCO, 2014, p. 498). A level of affections constitutes more a difference between the lived in common and the identity representations than exactly a lived or a representation (CLOT, 2010; LARROSA, 2008).

Through writing experiences, the stories of life and teaching enable teachers to tell and retell, write and rewrite their praxis. From the perspective of the worker himself, it is sought to enable the problematization of the unfoldings and crossings of work relations concerning the health of teachers, thus promoting a greater visibility on contexts that go from contentment to suffering at work. From the sensitive marks present in each writing, the work activity and the worker are sought, observing the stigma among those who, at times, leave and are pointed out as problem teachers. We seek to broaden the visibility to the different experiences lived by the teaching profession, bringing to light issues related to the quality of life, to the pleasure and happiness with and in the profession, and even to those related to the situations of being away from work.

It is all about being able to tell these stories, as well as to be able to narrate about the stories told, building and rebuilding the work, the teaching itself. Self-writing, teacher writing, or life and professional stories are bearers of an individual history, as well as bearers of the history of a social group. Narratives congregate expressive characteristics, endowed with the power of affection about oneself, about the one who reads or listens and, hopefully, with the power to discourage the formulation of policies and management practices. By narrating themselves, teachers transmit not only their lived experiences, but also the experiences historically constituted in their lives, lived from the place they occupy, socially and culturally, producing a particular image, loaded with memories, determinations, and forces of imposition of life in school trajectories. The act of narrating oneself as a way of re-signifying a lived experience leads us to the proposition that



“when narrating, the person says what he/she keeps of what he/she saw of him/herself” (LARROSA, 2008, p. 69). This form of writing, without the intention of being neutral, reflects who this person is who writes, what he thinks, what he feels, where he comes from, and what constitutes him. This condition admits the possibility of the writing workers to place themselves in an open space between creation and facts, weaving textualities marked by their reality.

By the creation of links between our writing and other stories that inspire us, as well as the establishment of bridges and dialogues – showing how they instigate us, how ideas are articulated and composed – we are allowed to build a richer construction, permeated with meanings and experiences that, at the same time, build and remodel a context. The challenges and experimentations that occur in the writing process involve transgression of rules and inversion of regularities. It is – writing – the opening of a space where the one who writes “does not cease disappearing” (FOUCAULT, 2001, p. 269).

Narratives, “either in the quality of those who lived them, or in the quality of those who tell them” (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 205), are artisanal forms of communication, in which the mark of the narrator is printed, leaving his traces on the things narrated. This storytelling, which is unique and singular, at the same time gives voice to a collectivity, a place of enunciation identified with the context of the teacher’s work. Thus, we try to work with a narrative that translates the experience of a body, with its lived memories, its marks, its sensations, and emotions. After all, when dealing with health, whether in research or in clinical practice, “somehow, narratives are always something that we deal with” (PASSOS; BARROS, 2015, p. 150).

These writtenlived narratives allow us listenings to the work, carried out through conversations and writings, the conversations about the writings and the writings about the conversations. It is to this extent that writtenlived can point to the capture of the becoming of school life: instead of potent bodies, powerlessness. It is possible that the narrative experiences the flight lines of re-singularization: “to write is to trace lines of flight, which are not imaginary, which one is forced to follow, because writing engages us in them, in fact, embarks us in them. To write is to become, but it is not at all, to become a writer. It is to become something else” (DELEUZE; PARNET, 2004, p. 35). This becoming something else has much to do with the delivery of those who write, with their work, their writing. In this way, the teachers weave their history intertwined with their professional history, being able to build, in a case of separation, new ways of interpreting the work, as well as the issues related to the leave.

Writing is like a path that goes through the inner world, that of the interlocutor, thoughts, ideas, and the outer world, with which it will build bridges, promote exchanges (DELEUZE; PARNET, 2004). Although everyone has their own distinct way of experiencing pain or suffering, the teachers’ writings aim to reach this feeling, not their categorization. It is a fluid movement that goes beyond the limits of a creation restricted to an analysis of the teaching work. It comprises a singular writing that is enriched as the writer’s ideas meet other stories that cross through them, becoming an integral part of that production.

The active process of recreation and re-signification of self, provided by memories in the histories of life and teaching work, is evidenced to the extent that “the mediations

between the memory of past trajectory and the desire for future projects” and between the self and the many others favor the specific weaving of a self-image (BRAGANÇA, 2012, p. 112). The biographical stories, present in the narratives, work as “biographies” (COSTA, 2011), events of a life, to the point of making us feel as a kind of intimate friend, those friends who know all the thoughts and sufferings of the other. To the extent that we somehow perceive ourselves in these traces of sensation, experience, affection, we intermix with them, then we can take in our hands the reins of a destiny to be built, to be launched.

## **Closing remarks**

The research (in its initial phase) is part of a doctoral thesis in the area of Education, having the references of the activity clinic as a way of thinking, and those of the writtenlived (modified from the original) as an intervention strategy, recognizing in teaching the fight for the right to well-being in the exercise of doing in the school. The construction of life and work experiences with the purpose of giving more visibility to the contexts lived by the protagonists of the teaching work, besides approaching the routine of the work activity and the different experiences lived, comprehends what is related to their health, seeking either a better quality of life at work (production of health), or a better quality of life (production of existence). The proposal was named “co(m)texts of teaching work: suffering and joy in school teaching” and is under experimentation since 2019. The joy of teaching, of doing teaching, and the power to act of these workers emerge from the research. Suffering at work, which leads to illness, is also a suffering in the withdrawal that resents absence from work. These writings, to the extent that they abandon their autobiographical anchors, the contact with the individual and collective antecedents of the trajectory of life, come closer to the fabrication of stories, that is, versions (self-affections or affections resulting from the experience of the self), no longer writings of living, but “writversions”, as a potency of affirmation of novel lines of struggle.

Whenever speaking of themselves, teachers also speak of others, of leaders, of students, of families, and of the public policies of education and health; they speak of the previous norms and of those in the process of being de-instituted/constituted, of the effects of the duration of the work and of the here and now of the activity. The idea is established in the perspective that contexts are not given, there is a movement, the contexts are always being given. We seek a sensitive listening in relation to the suffering generated in the work, in the absence from school and in the conditions of the return, as well as in the perspectives concerning the persistence with teaching and the pleasure of doing teaching. In this sense, it seeks to find what is in the re-signification and reinvention of oneself and one’s work in order to understand the transference of affections and signs as a teacher’s health, a force for subjectivation and a condition for the promotion and convocation of health.

In addition to that, it allows the writing of oneself and of the work to enable a greater visibility for what is lived in teaching, in which one experiences, on one hand, the suffering related to the precarious conditions and work process, while on the other, the

experiences of pleasure made possible by the interaction and production of knowledge and by the recognition of the school space as a space for intellectual cooperation and affective exchanges. The comprehension regarding the relations and conditions under which the teaching work is developed becomes fundamental to the study about teachers' health and teachers' quality of life.

The understanding of the issues involved in the teacher's health-disease process cannot be analyzed only from the health point of view, considering just biological factors. We believe in the importance of understanding the meaning of the teacher's work activity, through those who are the protagonists and experience the contexts involved in this activity. For that reason, we prioritize the attention to the paths that emerge from the writings, highlighting the plurality (as well as its singularities) that constitute the human experiences in the working activity. The situations of affective engagement are a necessary factor to persevere in teaching, especially where resistance and creation reside, but above all the ability to fight for better and healthier schools, teaching, and the political construction of school education.

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