

# Teachers' work at school as pedagogical praxis

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the theoretical and methodological aspects that guide research conducted in the municipality of Santa Maria, with the aim of examining how pedagogical work of basic education teachers takes place in school space and time, especially for Physical Education and Pedagogy graduates. It describes topic boundaries, theoretical aspects and corresponding methodological elements chosen for the project. The initial phase of the research is systematized concomitantly with data production at the school. As a result of these methodological choices, the aim is also to discuss pedagogical work as pedagogical praxis.

**Keywords:** Praxis. Pedagogical work. School.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This text systematizes the theoretical and methodological aspects that guide a study conducted in the municipality of Santa Maria, aimed at analyzing, in school space and time, the pedagogical work of teachers of Elementary Education, particularly of Physical Education and Pedagogy graduates. Therefore, we will not address the data generated, but rather the theoretical and methodological proposition that underpins the study, i. e. the process itself. Topic delimitations, theoretical

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aspects corresponding methodological elements chosen for the study are described. Therefore, the initial stage of investigation is systematized while data are collected at school. We intend to contribute to record and systematize the elements already consolidated, so they might become the basis for continuity. For that, the text was organized in steps that aim to describe and substantiate these theoretical and methodological aspects. As a theme substrate, collective production of the study is debated, which goes beyond compartmentalization and into learning centers, courses or research groups. Therefore, the aim is to think of research communities that jointly develop their processes and methods, reinventing academic research and making it increasingly into a pedagogical foundation. We also intend to debate pedagogical work, presenting it as pedagogical praxis and recovering the meanings of teachers' school work.

As already said, the study is performed by a group of researchers with the challenge of epistemologically interconnecting some elements, namely: a) two different areas of knowledge in graduate programs: Humanities and Health Sciences; b) interconnection between two courses, two teacher training degrees, their pedagogical proposals, their cultures and their *modus operandi* in research: the Pedagogy teacher training degree and the Physical Education teacher training degree. One of the reasons why that approximation is possible is that both Physical Education and Pedagogy are knowledge areas in search of asserting themselves. When challenging the lack of scientific basis for those two areas, Bracht (2007), points out “[...] theoretical problems that can also be treated scientifically; those problems require interdisciplinary exercise/training between different disciplines as well as between different rationalities” (BRACHT, 2007, p. 95).

When those knowledge areas are brought closer, the need arises to rearticulate methodologies and theoretical frameworks and make them compatible. That is a process of knowledge production on academic research and the areas in question. To

this end, meetings are held involving researchers, discussions on research topics, especially on pedagogical work, production of weekly reports that are shared and planning are conducted.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the research has value in itself for the data that will be produced and their analyzes. In addition, it seeks meta-learning about researching, research methodologies, and collective production of knowledge.

Guiding questions were established early in the research process: What is the theme of the proposal that is able to interconnect and move knowledge in the two areas? What are the criteria for selecting the study's interlocutors? Which is the theoretical and methodological perspective guiding and interconnecting the study? Regarding the first question, we decided to investigate pedagogical work, understood as the work of teachers at school – i. e. praxis (to be covered in the next section). That work was firstly described as the class and, in it, knowledge production by teachers and students. Obviously, this is the first and main instance of teachers' work, since teaching a class demands involvement and political participation in meetings, planning, actions with the school community, and strong imbrication, commitment and responsibility to the institutional educational project. It is therefore a dialectical movement between individual and collective: between what teachers produce, their individual educational project, and what the school, the community interconnected, has established in its institutional educational project.

Then, the choice of this theme started to organize the research work. However, due to the peculiar characteristics of the knowledge areas involved, it first demanded that differences and approaches were shown, based on this more general conception.

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<sup>1</sup>The survey is conducted by teachers and students at Physical Education and Pedagogy teacher training courses who are members of two research groups registered in the Lattes Platform of Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development – CNPq, namely: Kairós – Group of Studies and Research on Labor, Public Policy and Education, and GPELF – Research Group on Leisure and Teacher Training. Researchers hold weekly meetings to study, produce and analyze data, and systematize the research.

For pedagogues, the class usually takes place in groups of the Initial Years of Elementary school and Children's Education. It takes on its own pedagogical forms for those age groups and their ways of producing knowledge. The class of Physical Education teachers in Elementary Education often takes place in the Final Years.

## **2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Due to the aforementioned distributional characteristics of work in those areas, criteria for selection of research interlocutors were decided at school. Contact was made with a local public school from Santa Maria, RS, and at that specific time and space, our choice was to interact with pedagogues who were teachers of Initial Years of Elementary Education and Children's Education. Besides, considering a peculiar organizational aspect of the school, we chose to interact with two Physical Education teachers whose job is to plan and supervise classes in their area of expertise with pedagogues. A group was then formed including eight interlocutors who worked with the same students in order to analyze their discourses and the meanings they produce about their work.

Under the research's procedures and techniques, we propose:

- a) effective research work, in which subjects are interlocutors;
- b) systematization throughout the research process in order to guarantee and subsidize knowledge production by subjects participating in the project. To do so, the study is carried out as the following sequence:

I - Interviews with graduates from Physical Education and Pedagogy teacher training courses, recovering and finding the meanings of their memories about their work and school experience, i. e., the meanings they ascribed to their daily work at school;

II - Systematic observation of the work of Physical Education and Pedagogy graduates in school daily life, with later analysis and reflection on the elements observed;

III – Participation by researchers and Physical Education and Pedagogy graduates in groups of interlocution<sup>2</sup> to share and analyze the data produced.

Scientific analysis of the data produced will also happen dialectically, as discourse analysis, which require pre-analysis; recurring and structured readings; categorization based on indicators of meanings; meaning attribution to and processing of data; understanding and interpretation. Afterwards, these stages are restarted collectively in the groups of interlocution. Such procedures – from general to particular and from particular to general again – allow more effective entrance in the web of meanings that organize teachers' discourse and thus reveal how they work.

From a theoretical perspective, this research takes place in school space and time, and its theoretical framework is dialectic, highlighting categories of historicity, contradiction and totality.

### **3 TEACHERS' WORK AT SCHOOL**

The study's core topic is the work of teachers at school, which is primarily pedagogical. Based on this assumption, we intend to investigate that work as praxis – obviously pedagogical praxis.

Since this is a study, steps were established and built and will be followed in their movement, starting from a syncretic image of reality with a view to building categories and processes, and then returning to the concrete with new contributions to pedagogical knowledge of the context of study (SÁNCHEZ; GAMBOA, 2007). The theoretical-methodological framework is Marxist-inspired dialectical and historical materialism, which is described by Pires (1997) as the movement of thinking “[...] through the

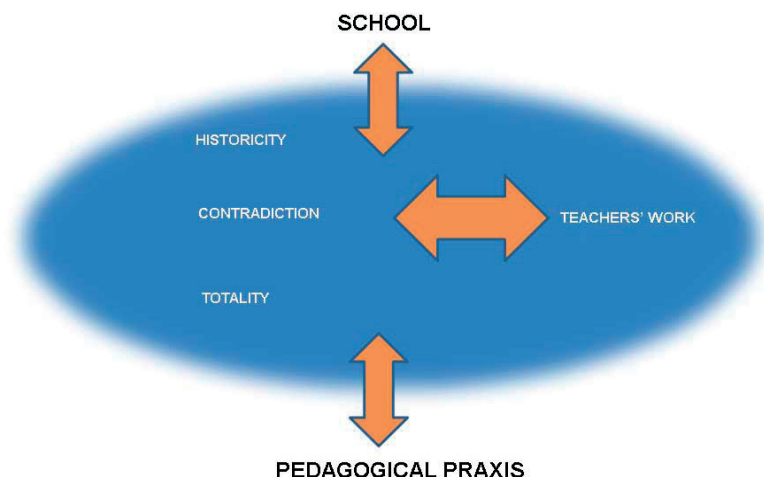
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<sup>2</sup>Groups of interlocution are moments of interaction between researcher and research subjects in order to share the results of the study and discuss data and issues that still need to be expanded. It is, therefore, “[...] a way to re-dimension the study by eliminating its appearance of merely taking advantage of the interlocutor's discourse and benefiting from the research without contributing and sharing its results. Moreover, it is a direction that is able to transform the research into an activity that brings together subjects involved, taking language as the environment for collective production of meanings and continuous re-dimensioning of actions in order to find answers to the problem”. (FERREIRA, 2006, p. 38).

historical materiality of man's life in society, that is discovering (by the movement of thought) the fundamental laws that define man's organizational form during the history of mankind" (PIRES, 1997, p. 87). Dialectics, in this view, is revealed as a theoretical orientation and enables the establishment of categories for analysis of the data produced. Three categories stand out in Marxist dialectics: historicity, contradiction, and totality. In his *Letter to J. Weydemeyer*, written in London on March 5, 1852, Marx describes the argumentative basis underpinning these categories:

[...] And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic economy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production* (historische Entwicklungsphasen der Production), (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*. Ignorant louts like Heinzen, who deny not merely the class struggle but even the existence of classes, only prove that, despite all their blood-curdling yelps and humanitarian airs they give themselves, they regard the social condition under which the bourgeoisie rules as the final product, the non plus ultra of history; prove that they are only the servitors of the bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1977, pp. 25-26)

In this inquiry, given its theoretical characteristics, historicity, contradiction and totality were established as categories of analysis. Thus, working concepts may always refer to the concrete extended, that is, the historical materiality of which subjects are part. Graphically, the movement between the theoretical and the methodological was organized as follows:

**Figure 1** - Movement between theoretical and methodological

Source: Prepared by the authors

Historicity is the process resulting from the relationship between humans and nature through work. Keeping the meaning attributed to history is a condition to ensure that Marxism remains in its integrity, without falling to pieces, since history is the revelation of the ways productive forces have evolved, their clashes, setbacks and progress. Importantly, there are production relations and production forces: the former act on the latter based on the management of labor and productivity: “Production forces and relations of production are the two aspects of the process by which humans produce and reproduce their conditions of existence” (BENSAID, 1999, p. 74). So, the meaning ascribed to history, according to Bensaid, is maintained by “[...] indicating the prospect of a new world to which today’s society inevitably leads us, and we are able to grasp the significance of the past” (1999, p. 46). Furthermore, “it is only in the light of future unity of mankind that the meaning of past universal history is revealed to us” (BENSAID, 1999, p. 46). History must be read from the present, and we must “no longer start from History as an explanatory principle; we see it

as what must be explained” (BENSAID, 1999, p. 49) and consider that “the new writing of History therefore requires elucidation of the actual internal structure of the mode of production” (BENSAID, 1999, p. 49). Only in this way could one be anti-utopian, seeking alternatives, undoing “[...] the range of possibles not in order to predict the necessary course of history, but to think the bifurcations arising from the present moment” (BENSAID, 1999, p. 49). And the author concludes: “Marx deconstructs the notion of universal history. Each present has a plurality of possible developments, but all these possibles have the same level of normality” (BENSAID, 1999, p 58).

In this research, historicity is the component that enables analyzing how teachers relate to their production and how they self-produce through their work. Seeing the work they do within a historical perspective, these subjects may perceive themselves as immersed in a “social” and ascribe meanings to what they produce.

Furthermore, confrontation between the way everything exists and its negation integrates the process of analysis of the data produced, opening way to its necessary overcoming. It is about considering contradiction as a category of analysis. According to Cheptulin (1982, p. 289), contradiction is “the unity of opposites and the struggle of opposites that are mutually exclusive and mutually presuppose each other”. Every historical movement is full of contradictions, which are drivers of development: “In fact, Marx was the first to show that the meaning of a theory cannot be understood apart from the historical and social practice to which it corresponds, in which it extends itself or which it is made to conceal”, says Castoriadis (1982, p. 20). Based on this dialectical movement, Marx predicted the transition from socialist to capitalist society, overcoming exploitation and alienation.

The principle of contradiction present in this logic indicates that in order to think reality, one can accept contradiction, walk through it and grasp what is essential to it. In this logical path, moving one’s thinking means thinking about reality starting from the empirical (given reality,



the apparent real, the object as it appears at first glance) and through abstractions (elaborations of thought, reflections, theory), arriving to the concrete: more elaborate understanding of what is essential in the object, object-synthesis of multiple determinations, the concrete thought (PIRES, 1997, p 87).

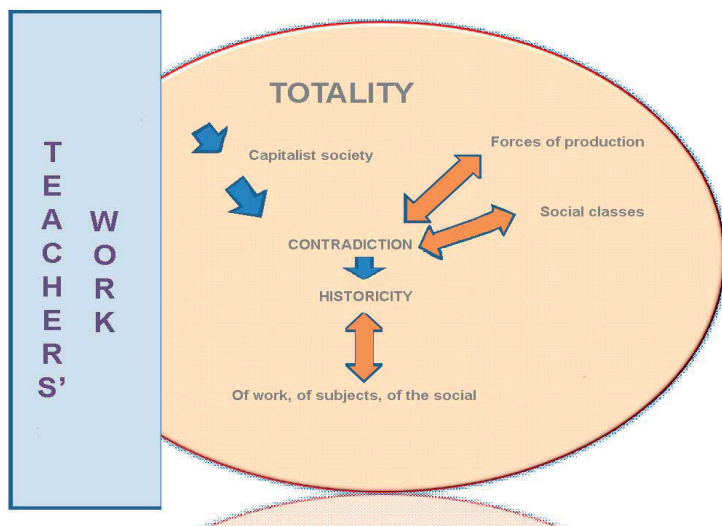
Totality, in turn, means “[...] perception of social reality as an organic, structured whole, in which one cannot understand an element, an aspect, a dimension without losing its relationship with the whole” (LÖWY, 1988, p. 16). Totality is in fact dialectical unity “[...] whose aspects are necessarily and naturally correlated and interdependent” (CHEPTULIN, 1982, p. 324). In this perspective, totality, together with historicity, is an important feature of dialectical analysis, allowing phenomena to be analyzed only if linked to the “development of social classes, history, political economy” (LÖWY, 1988, p. 16). Löwy (1988) underscores that totality does not correspond to the whole of reality. That would be unconceivable, because the real is infinite and does not end, it is always changing. Therefore, the author shows that totality corresponds to understanding social reality “as an organic, structured whole” (LÖWY, 1988, p. 16) so that one element is always related to the other, belonging to a whole. Therefore, we should understand that totality is not even a finished truth or a theory, much less a model; it is rather “developing knowledge, although provisional and approximate, with many silences and impurities” (THOMPSON, 1981, p. 61). A developing knowledge “[...] emerges from dialogue and its discourse of demonstration is conducted in accordance with the historical logic” (Thompson, 1981, p. 61). Therefore, Marx reiterates that concrete totality is not a concept that is above or separate “[...] from intuition and representation, and that engenders itself, but the development of intuition and representation of concepts” (Marx, 1982, p. 711).

It has been said that the concrete is not reality. It bears repeating that reality, the concrete, historicity, contradiction and totality are founding elements of dialectical analysis. Especially

about reality, Löwy (1988, p 16) says: “A dialectical analysis is always an analysis of the internal contradictions of reality”.

Once these categories are interconnected in the process of analyzing the data produced, we can formulate more approximate meanings of the work done by teachers at school. If work is social production, understanding it requires historicizing it, both for subjects individually and as an intervention in the human collective: How did the work of those teachers emerge? How does it happen in everyday life? What are its possibilities as human self-production and production? It also presupposes understanding that work immersed in a confluence of social forces, contradictorily organized in the form of modes of production and social classes that antagonize each other, inquiring about the class position taken by those workers. In that position, how do they direct their work? The answers to these questions are directly linked to understanding that there is a totality organizing all processes – capitalist society in its current metabolic stage (MÈSZÁROS, 2005; ANTUNES, 2005). These considerations are represented in the figure below:

**Figure 2 - Categories of analysis**



So, in this analysis, we gradually know the processes surrounding teachers' work as well as how that work is made into discourse by these workers and how they can be changed. Here, change seems to refer to thinking about changing it into effective pedagogical praxis.

#### **4 TEACHERS' WORK AT SCHOOL AS PRAXIS**

This study investigates how teachers' work takes place at schools with regard to pedagogical praxis. What does "pedagogical praxis" mean? One possible answer is related to a context. Outside school, it is all pedagogical action, which can happen in all expanded social spaces; inside school, all praxis is (or should be) pedagogical, since school is comprised of and from the "pedagogical". The pedagogical shows how "the group that makes up the school regularly organizes and how they understand and produce education. It transits dialectically between the individual and the collective, developing itself and taking place daily at school" (FERREIRA, 2008, p. 183). At the same time, pedagogical praxis is the essence of teachers' professional work and, from this perspective, it becomes scientific, therefore methodical, systematic, hermeneutically developed and theoretically sustained. It can claim to be a pedagogical praxis, then, a social praxis, because it is "[...] socially developed and organized according to intentions, knowledges" (FERREIRA, 2008, p. 184).

So at school, praxes are (or should be) always pedagogical. In other social spaces, however, they are not necessarily so, although if they were, perhaps we could have a city, a community, educational institutions and people that were more pedagogical. Everywhere, there would be concern about the subjects and their learnings, even if we knew that they all somehow already know something, but they can and they need to broaden their knowledges, reflect on them and, through language, produce knowledge (FERREIRA, 2006, p. 24). This utopia, perhaps dream, moves, when we think that the social includes pedagogical demands to be met by all subjects, not only

Physical Education teachers or pedagogues, since that transcends Pedagogy. Everything that is involved in the action of educating is pedagogical, even if not ratified by Pedagogy yet, that is, within common sense.

Especially when the pedagogical becomes part of school, it is regulated, normalized. And it is under certain power relationships typical of that space and that time, culturally elaborated. Those relationships are evident every day at school or in any space where pedagogical relationships are apparent. In some cases, they are naturalized by the group and are not prescribed in any document. Their repetition naturalizes them. They are forms from which subjects interchange knowledges, cultures, historicities. It may be said that no pedagogical praxis is disassociated from inter-relationships among subjects, since social interaction is its assumption, the foundation on which it happens. Praxis is itself pedagogical, because it is interactive, because it places subjects in interaction and they, as they interact, from the initial level, are already in interlocution of knowledges.<sup>3</sup>

However, when teachers surrender to routine, to performativity<sup>4</sup> that hits their daily work, they fall in what Sánchez Vázquez (2007) calls imitative, repetitive and reiterative praxis. A creative praxis, instead, can have an impact on theoretical and transformative production, leading to the unexpected, because it associates objective aspects to creation, having the following characteristics: human beings' production and self-production, facing the novel, reminding that the human being "[...] is the being who must be constantly inventing or creating new solutions" (SÁNCHEZ

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<sup>3</sup>Expression used by Marques (1996) to explain that the practice of the language is always interaction. It presupposed that subjects are involved in a dialogic situation, an I-you relationship: "Interlocution that is not mere amalgam of previous knowledges, the trespassing of some of them through others; it is learning against the previously learned, negation of what is already known in the constitution of new knowledge, of other knowledges" (MARQUES, 1996, p. 14).

<sup>4</sup>Performativity is facilitation of monitoring by the State (Ball, 2004, p. 1116) or other power centers, which, even at a distance, control actions, seeming to be omnipotent and omnipresent. Thus, in the case of teachers' work, performativity can be essentially pernicious when it prevents professionals from recognizing themselves in the work they do, generating what Ball calls, among other things, "destruction of solidarity ties based on a common professional identity" (Ball, 2004, p. 1120).

VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 247). Thus, creative praxis generates history. Sánchez Vázquez's concept of history summarizes human beings' individual, intentional, purposeful praxis, and unintentional praxis that – coupled with the praxis of other human beings – socially produces something unforeseen yet effective. In this conjunction between individual and social praxis, even though the natural is subjected to the rational, human history develops itself (SÁNCHEZ VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 247). In the centrality of Sánchez Vázquez's concept of praxis, there is a didactic separation between nature and the human being. Nature is some sort of entity to be transformed and the human being is the transformative potential. In the transformation process – effective mediation – work is produced that is nothing but praxis. Therefore, Sánchez Vázquez (2007, p. 219) states: “All praxis is activity, but not all activity is praxis”. Praxis is “[...] man's real, objective, material activity” (SÁNCHEZ VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 30). It is superior to practice, which is the “[...] act or object that produces a material usefulness, an advantage, a benefit [...]” (SÁNCHEZ VÁZQUEZ, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, reducing the work of teachers to activities, like reducing it to practice, eventually reveals a tendency to make it a mere repetition of techniques, which are necessarily objects of study and understanding of the historical and social perspective that substantiates the time and space which produces that work. In contrast, “[...] speaking of education as praxis is saying it cannot be reduced to a technique, here understood as mere application of pre-made knowledges, as if we were to demonstrate a theorem” (CORDOVA, 1994, p. 42). We could illustrate it by saying how these concepts operate in the organization of work of Physical Education teachers in the National Curriculum Guidelines of Elementary Education, Report n. 4 of 29.01.1998, in which physical education ceases to be considered a practical activity to be understood as an area of knowledge.

It is also worth noting that the discourses of school education often emphasize practice as an activity of that institution. Imbert (2003, p. 15) wonders: “Is there or is there not a place for praxis at school?” Practice, for the author, is “a doing” that happens

in a time and space in order to produce “an object (learnings, knowledges) and a subject-object (a schoolchild that receives that knowledge and suffers these learnings). However, at no time it carries a perspective of autonomy” (IMBERT, 2003, p. 15). It is practice because it is not included in a transformative pedagogical project; it limits itself to aspects. See, for instance, a school practice aimed at conducting a campaign against trash strewn in the school courtyard. Detached from a larger project, that practice aims to change, in some respect rather than in its totality, subjects’ actions. Also differently from praxis, practice is instantaneous, while the former “means tension, sight, a project that does not let itself be fixed in certain terms – a program – but opens up the field of an indeterminate, non-deductible process” (IMBERT, 2003, p. 16). In this sense, autonomy, the purpose of praxis, is also an “indeterminate process” that has a beginning but can take unexpected turns. Only then praxis takes on its perspective of “a doing that creates realities and new meanings” (IMBERT, 2003, p. 18). Therefore, such process is intended to the “unforeseen, the non-deductible, to creation, to the emergence of the novel” (IMBERT, 2003, p. 20). From the point of view of subjects, practice only puts them in interaction, in pursuit of achieving a goal, without necessarily implicating them in a collective project or even in bringing them together in the pursuit a transformative project. Praxis, in contrast, organizes a “new relationship bringing them together with each other, and each element is seen in transformation” (IMBERT, 2003, p. 38). So one of the inconsistencies in addressing teachers’ work is to present it as practice, when it requires reading the real, a proposition, a validation of the proposal and, in the process, an evaluation. Therefore, it is praxis, a singular action, responsible and productive regarding knowledge. If treated as practice, it is minimized in its potential, and worker’s implications with their production are awakened, thus reducing the political implications of that work.

## 5 PROVISIONAL FINAL REMARKS

It has been mentioned that this study began this year. In this first stage, systematized in this article, its purpose was to develop a theoretical and methodological framework, in parallel to production of data with the interlocutors, given the integrative characteristics of different areas provided by the project. This framework not only constitutes the moment of production of knowledge about the research; in transdisciplinary terms, it enables dialogue that clarifies, establishes links, reconnects procedures and guides the reading of the real, becoming supportive and collaborative meta-learning. Thus, we research and jointly learn how to research, because in spite of working in different areas of knowledge, although related, there are possibilities for that dialogue. The research takes place with historical and dialectical materialism as its theoretical and methodological support. Again, analysis of data produced will be based on the categories of historicity, contradiction and totality. Integrated, they allow researchers and interlocutors to understand the movements of meanings that shape teachers' work.

Throughout this process, we advocate the need for teachers to reclaim their working conditions based on the reworking of the meanings and in the pursuit of pedagogical praxis. Mechanisms implemented in school regarding the way of organizing teaching are thought to eventually colonize teachers' work, making it subjected in behalf of a democratized collective. Rather, we advocated the need for teachers to be able to (re) develop their individual pedagogical project, converging with the interests and beliefs of their peers, before a collective institutional educational project is made. We also seek to clarify what the work of teachers effectively is, since we realize their difficulty to express and describe what they do. Teachers' work is seen as class production – understood in its broadest sense, as every relationship that aims at knowledge in different social spaces – and in it, production of teachers' and their students' knowledge (FERREIRA, 2006, 2008). Thus, we believe that school may rediscover its meanings as an eminently

social institution and, in that process, overcome the difficulties it may face nowadays, that is, reaching their core aim: production of knowledge by subjects.

In this perspective, the research will continue seeking alternatives to (re) think pedagogical work, along with teachers-interlocutors at school.

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