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Teacher Identity and Neoliberalism: An Auto-Netnographic Exploration of the Public Education Crisis

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ABSTRACT
This auto-netnographic study explores the impact of neoliberal ideologies on teacher identity within the context of public education in Spain, with a particular focus on how social networks and media, such as Twitter and Facebook, shape and reflect these dynamics. Combining narrative introspection with thematic analysis of online content, the study examines how social media amplifies neoliberal values, including individualism, commodification and competitive appraisal, influencing teacher subjectivity and solidarity. By situating the findings within the Spanish educational landscape, the study highlights how localised socio-political dynamics intersect with global neoliberal trends. The results reveal that social media serves as both a platform for ideological critique and a site where collective identities are fragmented, contributing to the erosion of solidarity amongst educators. Ultimately, this research advocates for reclaiming public education values through critical reflection and dialogue, promoting a more equitable and humane educational system.

1 | Introduction

Education is not understood, experienced or lived in the same way by all teachers. The rupture that one may feel at times regarding the teaching profession, stems from some of the changes it has undergone in Spain in recent years (e.g., González-Calvo 2020a, 2020d; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018) leads to a reconsideration of educational conceptions and discontent with educational policies, exacerbated by a climate of dissatisfaction amongst teachers that manifest in verbal confrontations between different groups of educators, utilising social media as a means and platform (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019; Wang 2016).

The expression of this discontent, heightened by intra and inter-sector tensions within the teaching community, takes on a unique resonance on platforms such as Facebook and, more particularly, Twitter (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019; Wang 2016). In this digital space, educators find a channel to express and contextualise their concerns and differences, giving

rise to verbal confrontations that reflect the multiplicity of approaches and positions present in the educational sphere (Cheah, Oliveri, and Hughes 2023; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024). This virtual conflict, marked by ideological and methodological nuances, configures itself as a microcosm reflecting the palpable tensions in contemporary education, where pedagogical currents, educational policies and external influences converge and diverge in a dynamic crucible of ideas (Pritchard et al. 2024).

Particularly relevant in this context is the incursion of neoliberalism into the educational realm, a 'monster' (Mavelli 2024) or a phenomenon that has significantly influenced the perception and practice of teaching (Chiapello 2017; De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018). The notoriety of certain teachers, often recognised and rewarded by banking entities and other actors in the business sector, adds an additional layer to this complex web. The visibility and recognition bestowed upon these educators, aligned with narratives and values inherent to neoliberalism, exert a tangible influence on the direction teaching should take (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017;

Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; McMain 2024). This phenomenon, frequently observed on social media, not only reflects existing tensions between divergent educational approaches but also illustrates the penetration of economic logics into the pedagogical sphere, shaping teacher subjectivities towards a paradigm marked by competitiveness, commodification and individualised appraisal of professional performance (Mavelli 2024). The resulting dialectic contributes to the shaping of new teacher subjectivities, whose pedagogical identities are influenced by the complex interactions between ideological, political and economic factors in the contemporary digital environment (Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2017; Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019; Nesje, Canrinus, and Strype 2018).

To illustrate my narrative, I focus on autobiographical moments recounted and selected at different points in my life (Gullette 2003) to explore aspects of my profession related to the concepts of education, responsibility and the future. Simultaneously, I compare my own concerns with the messages that appear on social media regarding current education. My intention is to delve into my own subjectivity so that readers can reflect on their own experiences in relation to mine, and to depict how social media can shape the personal and professional identity of teachers.

1.1 | Teacher Subjectivity and Professional Development

The reconstruction of narrative biographies of teaching professionals has been the primary approach to examining teaching careers from a subjective perspective. In this novel approach, the life or aspect of the life of teachers is studied individually, understanding that each person has a personal part but also reflects the collective (González-Calvo and Fernández-Balboa 2018). This method of studying teaching careers contrasts with objective studies based on generalisations of professional lives.

Examining the literature reveals examples of teacher biographies approached from different personal circumstances and subjective perspectives that, when intertwined, can give rise to various types of studies. The first involves teachers narrating their own experiences. An example is Peter McLaren's experience as a teacher in a challenging Toronto school in the 1980s, documented in two books (McLaren 1995, 2005). In these texts, the complexity of being a novice teacher in a tumultuous school is explored. McLaren introduces the dichotomy of autobiography as a personal learning process or, conversely, in relation to the experienced contextual reality. This work is significant for emphasising the working environment rather than the teacher's self, as in later studies. Autobiographical works cover various aspects of teaching, such as being a teacher in a non-standardised context like a rural school (Barba 2006), experiences in an academic year (Sala Isern 2002), the nuances of teaching a specific subject (González-Calvo and Fernández-Balboa 2018), the importance of initial training in building professional identity (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2017; González-Calvo et al. 2014), a narrative review of a professional trajectory (McCourt 2009; Resina Martín 2010) or the reconstruction of the teacher's autobiography based on experiences as a student (Pennac 2009).

The second type of study is conducted by an external person on the teacher's biography. In these studies, the personal self does not drive the narration; instead, another person unravels the teacher's life story from their own perspective, linking conclusions with the teacher's dialogue. Typically, the person conducting this process is a researcher (Goodson 2004). However, literature presents other forms of biographical reconstruction that do not follow this line (e.g., Devís Devís and Sparkes 2004; González-Calvo and Varea 2019; Silvennoinen 2001).

The third and final type of autobiographical studies involves teachers gaining perspective on their own life history, presenting not their life story but their learnings in teaching (Bazarra, Casanova, and García Ugarte 2005; Cid Fornell 2009; González-Calvo 2020d; Haigh 2010). These texts are presented more as aids to new teachers than as biographical-narrative studies, offering reflections and solutions to some of the dilemmas they will face in their professional journey.

To the best of my knowledge, no study has delved into the extent to which social media may be influencing the shaping of a new teacher's subjectivity. This question becomes relevant in a scenario where digital platforms have evolved not only as channels for communication and idea exchange but also as arenas where educators actively participate in the collective construction of pedagogical knowledge. The intersection between social media and teachers' professional identity emerges as a dynamic and permeable space, where external influences and online interactions gradually mould individual and collective perceptions of teaching (González-Calvo and Fernández-Balboa 2018). This constantly evolving phenomenon raises the possibility that social media plays a significant role in the transformation of teacher subjectivity, influencing how educators conceive their role, interact with peers and adapt their pedagogical practices to the changing demands of the digital environment. In recent years, the concept of the education influencer has emerged, where some educators leverage social media to build personal brands, gain large audiences and monetize their influence, impacting not only their own identities but also those of their peers (Carpenter, Shelton, and Schroeder 2023; Kızıltaş 2023; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024). This phenomenon intersects with teacher entrepreneurship and contributes to the commodification of education, aligning with neoliberal ideals that increasingly shape professional identity in online spaces.

Exploring this phenomenon entails delving into the complex network of social and discursive interactions that characterise the contemporary digital landscape, as well as critically examining how these dynamics contribute to the formation of an ever-reconfiguring teacher identity. To address this, an auto-netnography (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021) is proposed here, analysing the impact of social media and mainstream media on the construction of professional identity.

1.2 | Neoliberalism, Globalisation and Social Media in the Educational Context

Neoliberalism is considered a set of complex and contradictory practices and discourses shaped by current global economies (Chiapello 2017; Luna 2015). These include capital

accumulation, profit generation, outsourcing, privatisation and the individualization of responsibility through the ability to make (correct) decisions (Macdonald 2014). In doing so, neoliberalism promotes a hyper-responsible self and a denial of imposed restrictions and limitations (Rose 1999). Individuals are often convinced that they are shaping their own living conditions, but this is often a covert technique to govern them by persuading them to make sense of their lives as if they were the result of their individual choices. People are supposed to be governed by their own freedoms and choices, and the irony is that individuals are convinced they are choosing their own freedom (Han 2015; Rose 1999).

Consequently, individuals are urged to self-monitor and invest in their own success, striving to be increasingly productive and adopting highly individualistic lifestyles (González-Calvo 2020a, 2020d). Neoliberal educational practices are, therefore, self-responsible, self-capitalising, self-governed and self-fulfilling (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Neoliberal school reforms are designed to privatise traditional government educational services, returning them to the market where matters such as school choice, teacher control measures, bureaucracy and criticism of traditional schooling, amongst others, are believed to yield better results (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Díez Gutiérrez 2018; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo 2020d). Community values and socially democratic constructions of education have largely been replaced by the principles of the citizen market economy and consumer choice (Chiapello 2017; Fernández Liria, García Fernández, and Galindo Ferrández 2017). In this sense, school systems are now a competitive market (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo 2020c) has become a sector open to profit, trade and commercial interests (Chiapello 2017; Díez Gutiérrez 2018; Fernández Liria, García Fernández, and Galindo Ferrández 2017; González-Calvo 2020d). It is necessary to reflect on the spirit of free, reflective and open education for all citizens. Otherwise, schools are destined for a distorted concept of equality and freedom, generating absurd competition amongst students devoid of any educational logic (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023).

Nevertheless, neoliberalism and globalisation are the two axes dominating educational policies in the 21st century (Adeoye and Tomei 2014; Díez Gutiérrez 2018; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; Heron 2008), along with global flows of capital, knowledge and resources (Gray, O'Regan, and Wallace 2018; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Schools, especially in Global North countries, are adopting economic models that lean towards the privatisation and standardisation of education (Azzarito et al. 2017; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023). This privatisation involves processes where students are considered consumers, and education is seen as a commodity (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Macdonald 2014). However, as a public policy tool, privatisation deceives by pretending to offer people more products and services to choose from Díez Gutiérrez (2012), which in our country has translated into the slogan of school freedom.

Within the realm of education, it is necessary to reflect and realise, as soon as possible, the omnipresence of neoliberalism.

Education bears the stamp of neoliberal globalisation, given how school content and citizenship are promoted. Whilst the 'commodification' of education has been occurring for years, we are currently witnessing the commodification of education itself (Díez Gutiérrez 2012, 2018), implying more profound changes. This commodification of education has direct repercussions on existing social interactions in the educational community (González-Calvo 2020d). It is noteworthy how globalisation implies an increase in mass media consumption for mercantilist purposes (Fisette and Walton 2014). Despite the large number of media consumers, very few critically consume them (Gard, Hickey-Moodey, and Enright 2013), leading to considering messages as the ultimate truth. It is significant that, in our country, the media is becoming one of the most powerful places to learn how to teach in school, what methodologies are most appropriate or what technologies can help in the teaching/learning process in a changing context (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019). Therefore, it is essential for education to be approached from a critical and reflective perspective; the teaching professional, in this regard, cannot fall into the error of allowing or, in the worst case, perpetuating the erroneous and commercial messages coming from social networks and media.

2 | Methodology

This study is guided by theories on teacher identity and neoliberalism in education, providing a foundation to examine how market-driven ideologies influence personal and professional subjectivities (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Ball 2003). Autoethnography and auto-netnography align well with the study's research questions by enabling an exploration of how social media amplifies neoliberal values and shapes teacher identity in a contested educational landscape. These methodologies allow for an in-depth examination of how digital spaces act as forums for educators to confront, challenge or inadvertently reinforce neoliberal ideals (e.g., González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018; Kozinets and Gambetti 2021; Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier 2018). In this sense, this methodological choice is rooted in the study's focus on introspection and situated experience, enabling a detailed examination of the researcher's dual role as participant and observer. This alignment ensures a robust framework for exploring the interplay between individual narratives and broader cultural phenomena (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018), which is critical to understanding the digital influences on professional identity.

By integrating these methodologies, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on teacher identity and neoliberalism, offering a critical perspective on the role of social networks and media in shaping educational discourse. In doing so, it sheds light on the intricate relationship between personal experience and social narratives, advocating for a renewed understanding of public education's value amidst market-oriented pressures.

2.1 | Rationale for Autoethnography

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen a narrative methodology, in the form of an autoethnography. I have done so for several reasons: first, because as Holman Jones, Adams

and Ellis claim (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013), if an author has a significant experience, reflects on the nuances of that experience and then writes to show how the 'aspects of experience illuminate more general cultural phenomena and/or show how the experience works to diminish, silence, or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes autoethnographically' (23). Second, because narratives have recently been experiencing more extensive recognition as a research method in the study of personal and professional identities (Layen 2015). Third, because the essence of narratives is, not that they are based on the historical events narrated, but rather that they play a significant role in the process of construction and transformation of one's identity, as well as in the examination of beliefs and professional goals, and the ways to achieve them (Chan 2012). Fourth, because autoethnography allows for a better comprehension of the choices of the teacher and how he experiences them; in other words, it shows the teacher's research interests, the matters investigated, the paradigms considered, the methodology used in the development of his work and his writing skills (Wellington et al. 2005). Fifth, because he uses his own experience as a researcher to describe and criticise cultural experiences (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015; Ellis and Adams 2014), the core of this study. And finally, because this is a tool that permits the in-depth study of a reality that is familiar to the teacher (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018).

Following Eriksson (2013), who notes that personal experience must be embedded within a specific culture and that writing should connect emotionally with the reader, I here present a close, honest study. This does not mean that there is no room for scholarship. It is rather justified by the fact that educators should feel responsible for offering an appropriate language, accessible to different readers. In this sense, I agree with Kincheloe (2008) who claims that living critical pedagogy, relevant and effective, in the modern world, must be at the same time intellectually rigorous and accessible to different audiences. It is possible that, by doing so, the socio-cultural function that the writing intends to fulfil becomes more noticeable. In fact, the narrative is a product written to be socially shared, seeking to link the self with its context and the people inside it (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010). To that end, all the daily perceptions, experiences and dilemmas experienced by me throughout the school years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, were registered in a logbook that reflects my everyday life as a Primary Education Teacher.

2.2 | Rationale for Auto-Netnography

Netnography is a methodology developed by Kozinets (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021) that involves the study of online communities and cultures. Auto-netnography integrates netnography with autoethnography, entailing the examination of 'online' communities and spaces through the researcher's experiences (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021; Kozinets and Kedzior 2009). Auto-netnography is, therefore, inherently reflexive and introspective in nature (Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier 2018; Villegas 2018). In numerous instances, it necessitates contemplating the intricate relationship between online and offline realms. Succinctly, the demarcation between autoethnography and auto-netnography proves challenging due to the manifold

ways in which online and offline interactions intertwine, compounded by the absence of a distinct boundary between 'online' and 'offline' spaces (Miles 2017; Villegas 2018). This methodological approach offers a unique contribution to the international scientific community by bridging reflexive introspection with the analysis of digital phenomena (Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier 2018). This convergence is particularly valuable in contemporary educational and sociocultural research, where the interplay between online and offline spaces significantly shapes professional identities and broader cultural narratives (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021; Villegas 2018).

This study endeavours to explore the blurring of boundaries between online and offline contexts concerning the construction of professional teaching identity. To this end, it delves into the content shared within teacher communities on Twitter and Facebook, examining how this blending complicates the separation of personal and professional identity. This complication arises from the omnipresence and significance that educational technologies have acquired in today's educational milieu. The exploration of the impact of such technological omnipresence on the construction of professional teaching identity contributes to our understanding of the evolving dynamics between online and offline spheres in contemporary educational settings.

2.3 | Addressing Subjectivity and Ensuring Academic Rigour

Recognising the challenges of subjectivity and potential bias in autoethnography, this study adopts several strategies to ensure academic rigour. First, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process to document personal biases, emotional responses and evolving perspectives, enabling critical self-examination (Anderson 2006). Second, triangulation through peer debriefing sessions with other educators and researchers was employed to validate findings and offer alternative interpretations, enhancing the reliability of the results (Tracy 2010). Furthermore, coding and thematic analysis were applied to data collected both from the reflexive journal and online interactions, following a structured analytic approach to uncover recurring patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

To further support methodological rigour, I drew on narrative coherence (Frank 2010; Sparkes 2002), ensuring that the personal narratives and online content align logically and contribute to a holistic understanding of the issues explored. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis that integrates individual experiences with broader cultural and ideological phenomena, thus strengthening the study's analytical depth.

2.4 | Data Collection and Analysis of Social Media Content

The data collected for the auto-netnographic component includes posts, interactions and shared content from Twitter and Facebook teacher communities, focusing on discussions surrounding public education and neoliberal values. Posts were selected based on their relevance to themes such as professional identity, commodification of education and public versus

private education. A thematic analysis was conducted on this data, examining the frequency and sentiment of keywords related to neoliberalism and teacher identity (Saldaña 2009). Ethical considerations were prioritised by anonymizing any identifiable information and focusing solely on publicly available content, adhering to ethical guidelines for internet research (Hunsinger 2020).

2.5 | Ethical Considerations

The dual nature of this study – blending personal narrative and public online data – requires careful ethical considerations. In line with ethical standards for both autoethnographic and online research, informed consent and privacy were central concerns (Hunsinger 2020). As this study draws on personal experiences, reflexivity was crucial in balancing openness with respect for the privacy of others. For the auto-netnographic component, only publicly available posts were analysed, ensuring compliance with privacy standards and reducing potential harm to individuals who may not be aware their contributions are being studied.

3 | Results and Discussion

A man in his 70s opens the door of the house and hesitates at the entrance. He feels out of place. The rest of us are around 40 years old, except for our children, mostly between three and 6 years old. He is the father of one of our acquaintances. He has come to spend a few days in the company of his son and grandson. A mountain hat covers his head. His nails are dirty, and his physical appearance seems typical of a farmer. However, I know that he is a retired teacher.

Marta and I talk daily about teaching. These are passionate conversations that serve as mutual solace, reciprocal advice and where there is little room for contradiction: we both think similarly. I also chat daily with my colleagues at school; in these cases, the conversation is usually superficial, almost minute-by-minute details (how is that class going? How did they behave today? Are they going out for recess in this wind?). In recent months, the superficial daily details about education are the only things I have talked about with people other than my partner. So, I missed a conversation with a retired teacher, someone who could show, from their perspective, how they have experienced the passage of years in the profession.

From the beginning, I am interested in knowing, in asking him. I bend my body in his direction, extend my hands towards him, look him in the eyes and confidently ask, 'You were a teacher, do you miss the profession?' 'Not at all', he replies. I ask him why not, and that is the spring that encourages him to converse and explain himself. I pay little attention to the conversations taking place in parallel; I am also not very interested in the dinner appetisers. There is food that I love on the table, but I prefer not to divert my attention.

'Everything has changed too much since I started working at 23 until now', he begins to say. He recounts the changes he has experienced in the profession over these 40 years as a teacher. His tone is undoubtedly distressed, and his perspective is pessimistic about the passage of time, where any resemblance between his beginnings and now is pure fiction.

The conversation drifts into deeper reflections on how society perceives teaching. 'People talk about education without knowing anything about it. No other profession is treated like this', he says. Here, I recognise what scholars call 'educational populism' – a trend where teaching is reduced to oversimplified stereotypes that trivialise the profession (Chomsky 2013; Díez Gutiérrez 2018; Laval and Dardot 2018). Teachers are depicted not as experts or intellectuals but as mere functionaries with long vacations and minimal responsibilities. In social media, this perception escalates: platforms are flooded with criticisms of educators, attacks from every angle and even teachers questioning each other's methods and values (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024).

This educational populism is, in part, an outgrowth of the neoliberal push to reshape public opinion on teaching, stripping it of the respect and esteem it once held (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018). His experience resonates with the reality described in the notion of 'audit culture' (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018; Sparkes 2013), which positions educators under constant scrutiny and control, demanding productivity metrics whilst ignoring the core purpose of education: critical thinking and personal growth.

When he mentions that he discouraged his son from becoming a teacher, I feel a pang of recognition. The profession is hardly seen as a worthy or stable career path anymore, a shift that echoes findings on the negative impact of neoliberal reforms on teacher morale and career choice (De Lissovoy 2013; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023). As teachers, we are becoming hesitant to recommend the profession to younger generations, sensing that the future of education may continue to decline.

Day after day, on social media, all the hatred is poured around the teaching profession. They serve as a suitable stage to express and confront different perspectives amongst teaching collectives. One common clash occurs between educators and the philosophy of education scholars. These disagreements have their roots in the opposition of educational values, with both sides clear about what is considered educational and what should not be part of our teaching practice. Thus, whilst one side advocates for a more traditional approach focused on the transmission of knowledge as the primary axis, the other defends an emancipatory education that promotes equal opportunities. The dichotomy between supporters and opponents of educational technology is also a strong source of discord, highlighting the complexity of contemporary debates about the nature and objectives of teaching (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019). This conflicting landscape, which does little to develop a strong and healthy professional identity (who would want to be part of a collective incapable of dialoguing politely and discussing their views?), makes it difficult to understand the purpose and direction of public education in today's society (Kızıltaş 2023).

Teachers, once part of a close-knit professional community bound by shared values and purpose, now experience growing isolation. Lipovetsky's hyperindividualism (Lipovetsky 2005)

reflects a shift towards self-interest and personal success, a concept that neoliberal policies have amplified within education by encouraging competition over cooperation. This hyperindividualistic ethos alienates teachers from each other, positioning them as isolated agents accountable solely for their personal 'success' or 'failure' rather than part of a collective mission. The rise of education influencers exemplifies how social media encourages individual branding and self-promotion amongst educators, reinforcing a hyper-individualistic professional environment. This phenomenon intensifies competition amongst teachers, as educators may feel compelled to emulate influencers' practices, philosophies or branded identities, contributing to the erosion of collective solidarity (Carpenter, Shelton, and Schroeder 2023; Kızıltaş 2023; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024). Social media, too, reinforces this hyperindividualism, as educators are encouraged to 'brand' themselves, often measuring their worth by followers, likes or shares. This digital self-promotion creates an image of teaching that is far removed from its communal, democratic roots and instead frames it within a marketplace of individual achievements (De Lissovoy 2013; De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018).

A significant impact of this situation is the erosion of teacher identity, especially with the increase in digital platforms where opinions and tensions amplify (Greenhow, Galvin, and Staudt Willet 2019; Pritchard et al. 2024; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024). Lupton (2020) highlights how social media often isolates rather than unites educators, and in doing so, it perpetuates a fragmented professional identity. This sense of disintegration is worsened by neoliberal ideologies that promote 'networked individualism', where each teacher is an isolated, self-sufficient entity, disconnected from the collective (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). What was once a strong community is now a fractured and solitary profession, dependent on self-promotion and online image.

When the retired teacher asks, 'How is it possible that the public believes in private schools more than in public ones?', the weight of his words settles heavily on me. We discuss how privatisation, fueled by political rhetoric, undermines public education (Gray, O'Regan, and Wallace 2018). Private schools are often viewed as superior, a perception that political narratives and certain media reinforce. This situation has led to a dichotomy in which public school teachers are under immense political and social pressures, whilst their private counterparts often benefit from a more secure image, even if their actual responsibilities and challenges differ little in substance.

The influence of neoliberal values has infiltrated this debate as well, painting public education as an inefficient bureaucracy whilst romanticising the private sector as flexible and innovative (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Díez Gutiérrez 2018; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo 2020d). However, as Fernández Liria, García Fernández, and Galindo Ferrández (2017) remind us, public education's role in promoting equitable learning and democratic ideals is irreplaceable, even if it is increasingly overshadowed by policies that favour privatisation.

The dialogue underscores a crisis not only of recognition but of purpose in public education. Public educators, tied to strict accountability standards and political mandates, find themselves restricted in ways their private sector counterparts do not. With 'parental pin' policies and bureaucratic requirements, public educators are cornered and forced to justify every pedagogical decision. Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault 1979) is alive and well in today's schools, where even teaching methods and lesson plans are surveilled and judged under public and political scrutiny.

I look at the retired teacher, understanding his despair. I wonder if I, too, will discourage my son from becoming a teacher. His words make me question what lies ahead, knowing that neoliberalism's grip on education is only tightening. In this setting, teacher autonomy and public education's role in fostering critical, democratic citizens are at stake.

Returning home, I lie awake in bed, wrestling with these realisations. My mind revisits his words, my own doubts and the future we're building – or dismantling – for students and educators alike. It is as if, through social media, everyone has become an expert on education, advising teachers on their emotions, productivity and even their identities. We are told to cultivate passion, resilience and joy in the face of mounting adversities and to be endlessly 'positive'. Skliar (2020) points out the irony in this: educators are expected to be unwavering in the face of diminishing support, asked to embody an ideal that is unrealistic, unsupported and above all, unsustainable.

In this context, we must consider that policy implications are vast. Public education is at a crossroads, with its very foundation challenged by forces that view it as a burden rather than a pillar of democratic society. The findings from these reflections and observations reveal a field under duress, where social media's influence, neoliberal policies and privatisation are fracturing an already strained profession.

It is clear that without systemic changes, the path forward may only deepen the existing fractures. For public education to survive and thrive, policies must reaffirm the importance of education as a public good, promote teacher solidarity and resist pressures towards privatisation. The value of teachers cannot be measured in terms of productivity or profitability alone (De Lissovoy and Cedillo 2017; Flores-Rodríguez and Martín-Sánchez 2023; González-Calvo 2020b); it must encompass the collective strength and purpose that true education represents.

4 | Conclusions and Implications

This study highlights the profound impact of neoliberal ideologies on the professional identity of teachers, exacerbated by the pervasive influence of social networks and media. Neoliberalism, with its focus on market-driven principles, has increasingly infiltrated educational systems, reshaping them into competitive environments that prioritise individual success over collective well-being. This shift is evident in how public education has become more susceptible to commercial interests, where policies often align with privatisation efforts that marginalise the values of community and equality (Ball 2003; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). As a result, teachers face pressures to conform to a market-oriented model of education, which affects their role, autonomy and ability to foster inclusive, democratic learning spaces.

The analysis of social networks, especially on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, reveals that digital spaces meant to foster solidarity amongst teachers can paradoxically lead to division and isolation. This phenomenon arises as educators confront varying ideologies, influenced by both public and private actors who dominate online educational discourse. The constant exposure to neoliberal ideals – presented as 'innovation' or 'efficiency' – creates an environment where educators may feel compelled to adopt practices aligned with these values, even when they conflict with their pedagogical principles. This dynamic fosters competition rather than collaboration, weakening the solidarity essential to challenging systemic issues within education (Lupton 2020). Addressing this paradox requires building stronger, purpose-driven online communities that prioritise shared professional values over external pressures.

In terms of practical implications, this study emphasises the need for critical reflection amongst educators and educational institutions. For teachers, recognising and resisting neoliberal values in their practice is crucial. Reflecting on personal and collective identity can strengthen resilience against these influences. Schools and educators can establish professional communities that emphasise support, collective knowledge-sharing and resistance to market-based educational models. Developing these communities requires a commitment to open dialogue and mutual understanding, countering the hyper-individualism that neoliberalism promotes (Archer 2008; Luna 2015). The education influencer phenomenon highlights the need for educators to critically engage with social media, recognising both the opportunities and pressures it creates (Carpenter, Shelton, and Schroeder 2023; Kızıltaş 2023; Schroeder, Shelton, and Curcio 2024). As social media reshapes teacher identities and practices, fostering critical media literacy amongst educators could help mitigate the risks of commercialization and maintain the integrity of the teaching profession.

To resist the effects of media and social networks on teacher identity and solidarity, educators and policymakers should consider implementing structured, critical media literacy programs within professional development. These programs can help educators identify and challenge neoliberal narratives in educational discourse, providing them with tools to engage with media critically and supportively (Archer 2008; Luna 2015). Additionally, policy reforms could promote collaborative spaces in schools that allow educators to share their experiences and practices without fear of judgement or competition (González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018).

Policymakers also have a role in resisting the commercialization of public education. By implementing policies that protect public resources, ensure equitable funding and reduce the influence of corporate interests in educational content and pedagogy, governments can uphold the values of public education as a common good. Encouraging investment in professional development and public recognition of teaching as a community-centered vocation, rather than a competitive enterprise, can further empower educators to pursue practices rooted in social justice and inclusivity (e.g., Gerdin 2024; Mordal Moen et al. 2020; Schenker et al. 2019).

Whilst neoliberal policies pose significant challenges, it is essential to acknowledge the complexities they introduce. For instance, whilst the push towards privatisation can undermine public education, certain innovations promoted within neoliberal frameworks, such as digital technologies for learning, have potential benefits if critically adapted. Rather than categorically rejecting neoliberal elements, a balanced approach would involve leveraging beneficial practices selectively, guided by a critical framework that aligns with democratic values and educational equity (Hunsinger 2020; Morozov 2012).

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of a robust, critical educational framework that enables teachers to resist market-driven influences and maintain their professional integrity. The future of public education depends on empowering educators to uphold values of inclusivity, equality and collective agency in their practice. Only by fostering a professional identity committed to these principles can educators effectively counter neoliberal pressures and contribute to a more equitable, humane educational system (González-Calvo 2020a; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018). To this end, building a culture of solidarity within teaching, both online and offline, will be instrumental. By promoting an educational environment that values social justice and collective well-being over competition and commercialization, educators can help shape a resilient foundation for future generations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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