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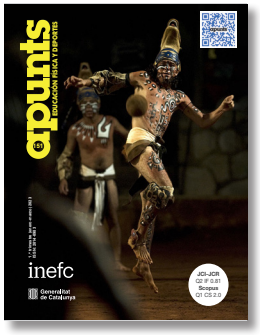

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Physical Education Public Examination as an Obstacle For Long-term Contract Teachers

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A Mexican man in pre-Hispanic Aztec costume eludes the ball during a traditional "Juego de Pelota" (in Spanish), called by the Maya "pok-ta-pok" and by the Aztecs "tlachtli". Xcaret eco-park, Mexico June 5, 2009
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Abstract

Teaching is a profession in which past professional experiences are particularly relevant, as they are based on the resolution of concrete pedagogical and social situations. The main aim of the study is to analyse how physical education teachers construct their perspectives and ideals about the profession, the conflicts they experience, as well as the belief that their teaching job has an expiry date. Twelve Spanish PE teachers (seven men and five women), with at least 14 years of teaching experience, participated. A qualitative narrative study using semi-structured interviews was used. The results reflected a decrease in commitment and passion for the profession due to the pressure exerted on these educators by the filters and strategies of the Spanish education system's public examinations.

Keywords: contract teachers, Physical Education, precariousness, professional identity, public education system.

Introduction

The admission system for the public teaching service in Spain

In Spain, the admission process for the teaching profession is carried out according to the Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement of the quality of education. This Law establishes that the admission process will consist of two different tests, each consisting of two different parts: (a) a test of specific knowledge of the speciality, in which the candidate will have to answer a written exam and design an educational intervention in the form of a reasoned and well-founded teaching unit; (b) a test of pedagogical aptitude, in which the candidate will have to present and defend a teaching programme and a teaching unit before a panel composed of five practising specialist teachers. It is a process anchored primarily in the academic preparation and cognitive mastery of applicants.

Once they have successfully undergone the process, future teachers will have to complete an internship period over the course of a school year which, once completed, will grant them the status of civil servants of the State, for life. If they do not pass the process, applicants may obtain a temporary position, i.e. a position in a public school on a temporary basis for a variable duration ranging from fifteen days to a full school year.

It is a selective system in which the discourse of quality is emphasised, based on a competitive and well-established model within a neoliberal context. This means that every year thousands of applicants attempt to pass the admission process unsuccessfully, resulting in job insecurity and presenting them with a Gordian knot from which it is difficult for them to escape, full of difficulties, pressures and stress.

Cycles in the teaching profession

The career and professional development of teachers has a dual dimension (Bolívar Botía et al., 1998): (1) objective or structural, which explains the different phases that make up a teaching career; (2) subjective, which focuses on how the individual experiences his or her teaching career in relation to the present. This dual dimension has prompted numerous studies from different perspectives on teacher professional development.

The objective claims are based on developing the stages that a teacher goes through in the course of his or her profession. According to studies carried out by different authors (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Howe, 2006; Vonk, 1989; Vonk & Schras, 1987), the stages differ in number, duration and in the criteria used to develop some of their main characteristics. However, they all have at least three stages in common —novice teacher, expert and retiring teaching— and they also understand teaching as a gradual process.

In this sense, teachers go through different stages in which they build their own professional image and shape their way of being and approaching the profession. Throughout their careers, teachers undertake an analysis of their personal and working lives that helps to explain the character and provenance of their thinking as teachers, their actions and their practical knowledge about teaching (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2016).

Among these studies, Berliner (1988) considers teacher professional development to be a gradual process that includes the following phases: (a) apprentice, where the teacher begins to acquire standards and habits related to the profession; (b) advanced participant, gaining confidence and experience in the profession; (c) competent, beginning to make decisions about students and the teaching/learning process; (d) skilled, clearly perceiving teaching situations, showing teaching intuition; and (e) expert, which involves full development in the profession, reached only by some educators.

Vonk (1989) proposes another model of professional development focusing on teacher conflict and its resolution. This proposal is divided into: (a) pre-professional, characterised by how the teacher settles into teaching, including as milestones: initial training; the first teaching year; and professional growth up to the seventh year of the profession; (b) first professional phase, from when the teacher starts to show confidence and begins to innovate until the first major crisis that makes it necessary to reorient his or her understanding of the profession; and (c) second professional phase, a stage in which the solution to the previous crisis is resolved by becoming a pessimistic and defeatist teacher or, on the contrary, one who rethinks teaching and finds motivation in it.

Objectives

The aims of this study are: (a) to investigate the process of professional development of long-term contract teachers; (b) to find out how temporary status conditions the pedagogical practice of the educator; and (c) to examine in depth the role played by the admission process in the personal and professional identity of the teacher.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 volunteers (7 men and 5 women) between the ages of 35 and 47 ($\bar{x} = 41.66$; $\sigma = 3.65$), currently working in public primary education schools within the Physical Education speciality (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Experience (years)
Javier	Male	39	14
Rodrigo	Male	39	15
Alberto	Male	41	17
Nicolás	Male	45	20
Hugo	Male	45	18
Adrián	Male	46	17
David	Male	47	20
Paula	Female	37	14
Olivia	Female	37	15
Emma	Female	39	17
Patricia	Female	39	16
Leire	Female	46	22

Purposive sampling was utilised for the selection of participants (Suri, 2011), within a radius of 200 kilometres from the home of the study's principal investigator. In order for the selection of teachers to be representative, only those with a minimum of 10 years of experience were invited to participate [range = 14 to 22 years; $\bar{x} = 17.33$]. All of them have sat the selective examination at least six times. Due to the diverse characteristics and professional experience of the participants, the sampling method fostered: (a) rich narratives related to the purpose of the study; (b) rich and high quality descriptions; and (c) identification of significant professional patterns.

Data collection

Data collection began shortly after participants agreed to participate by signing an informed consent form. Data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Valladolid, following the Code of Good Practice in Research.[1]

The participants were asked about: (a) their professional experience as contract teachers; (b) the problems that arise around the public examination process; and (c) the feelings they have about themselves, the work they do in schools and the people they interact with. In order to encourage free and open narratives on these topics, participants chose the time and place of the interviews and were guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. In addition, the interviews were conducted informally, as friendly conversations in which the researchers acted as active listeners and gently prompted participants to generate detailed narratives related to the purpose of the study (Smith, 2010).

Analysis of data

The data were analysed in narrative terms (Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis of the transcripts was carried out by interpreting what was said (Sparkes, 2005). A qualitative software package (Atlas 6.0) was used to assist in data management. Initially, this led to the identification of the main categories or themes. The three researchers then conducted a second round of analysis through a process of constant comparison of the texts in order to establish credible and reliable sub-themes in each category (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Relevant quotes were selected below to illustrate these themes and sub-themes. Finally, all this information was again compared and contrasted with relevant literature in pedagogy, sport psychology and cultural studies to compile the final results, discussion and conclusions.

Results and Discussion

The results highlight three main themes: (a) struggle vs. resignation from the system; (b) temporary status as an impediment to teaching commitment; and (c) personal and professional feelings in the life of a contract teacher.

[1] *[https://uvadoc.uva.es/bitstream/handle/10324/46283/Codigo-buenas-practicas-investigacion-Universidad-Valladolid.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y] [accessed on 01.07.2022].*

The admission process: teacher accreditation vs. resignation from the system

The participants in our study have more than fourteen years of professional experience, making them competent and expert teachers (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Howe, 2006). Moreover, their experience is spread across different educational centres —in rural and urban contexts— and across different stages —early childhood education, primary education and secondary education— which adds an obvious richness to their pedagogical practice. While recognising that the passage of time brings important skills within the profession, none of the participants define themselves as experts:

> "I have taught all kinds of children —even adults— in all kinds of schools and in different provinces. I believe that I have a good professional background that makes me a better and better teacher. But I don't consider myself an expert, nor do I believe that the expert teacher exists. [...]. A good teacher has to learn new things every day." (Leire)

> "I see myself as just another pupil in the classroom, someone who has to reflect on what happens in each lesson and look for ways to improve. I do believe that every year new skills and learning are acquired, but the students are also changing and evolving, which means that we cannot stop educating ourselves, being critical and learning from our day to day." (Alberto)

> "The passage of time brings skills as a teacher. You know more about how to manage children, how to deal with families, with colleagues... But that doesn't make me an expert. It's not as complicated as in the first years, but it's not like being an expert either." (Patricia)

Although they do not define themselves as experts, and although they have not passed the admission process, the participants do consider themselves to be competent professionals in the field of teaching:

> "I am competent, of course. If I didn't consider myself competent, I wouldn't do this. I know how to deal with the group, I know what and how I have to teach... This is what I know how to do, and I know that I am qualified for it, even if I have not yet passed the public exam." (Emma)

> "All this time I have continued studying, training, learning day after day... I have not passed the public examination, but I know as much or more than anyone who has passed it and I know how to put my knowledge into practice." (Hugo)

While teachers with more than five years' experience are considered in the literature to be accredited as professionals with real teaching knowledge (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Helms-Lorenz et al., 2012; Howe, 2006; Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2011), in the case of admission to the teaching profession in the public sector in Spain this may not necessarily be the case. Our participants consider themselves competent as teachers, but not so much as "teacher-applicants":

> "I have tried so many times now that I don't feel I can prove that I am a good teacher in the public examinations. Maybe it's that the examining board doesn't like what I'm trying to defend, or maybe I get too nervous and I don't know how to explain it... The fact is that I do think I'm a good teacher, but I'm not good when it comes to the examination." (Olivia)

> "I maintain a duality with myself between being a teacher and being an applicant. [...]. Although in my day-to-day life I prepare a lot for my lessons and I know I am good at teaching, not being able to get the job stresses me out and depresses me. It makes me think that I'm not such a good teacher after all." (Alberto)

> "Examinations are 'my worst enemy'. They make me feel useless and defeated." (Adrián)

At times, participants are conflicted about their perceived competence in relation to that of other newly qualified teachers. They tend to justify their professional competence in dichotomous terms: while novices are more proficient in the theoretical aspects of teaching, they are more proficient in practical skills, which they consider more valuable:

> "I have much more knowledge about what and how to run the class, how to teach, how to control the students [...]. Of course, those who have just passed know more about education law, the theoretical aspects of teaching... But in terms of daily work, which in the end is what is important, I have much more knowledge than they do." (Olivia)

This theory-practice dichotomy means that participants do not see study for the examination and the preparation of the didactic programme —essential prerequisites for successfully passing the admission proces— as professional growth activities. On the contrary, they consider these aspects to be far removed from school reality:

> "What you study and prepare for the examination brings very little to the work in the classroom. In daily work, the aspects learnt in the syllabus do not come into play, the programme you have had to prepare often does not coincide with the reality of the institution where you work [...]" (David).

"Each course I try to rework the syllabus, the programme, the lessons I teach in the classroom... I try to connect what I practise every day at school with what is required in the public examinations. But it's not an easy task: one thing is what I do with the children, and another what I am asked to defend before the panel." (Paula)

For the participants, the difficulty of successfully passing the admission process —they have all been through the process at least six times— causes a deep emotional wound that causes them to resign themselves from the process, and doubts arise as to whether their choice of profession was the right one:

"It makes me very angry when I see that other people pass the examination. It makes me very angry, but not for them, but for myself, because I think that I have also tried many times, I have tried hard for many years, and it doesn't help." (Leire)

"Years go by and again and again I have to take the exam. It's almost like a routine in my life now. I am resigned to it. I go through one school, another, one year, another year, and it's always the same. Eternal temp." (Nicolás)

However, despite the negative emotions associated with the admission process, they are still interested in preparing for it. Partly because it is the only thing they have done professionally; partly because of the attraction of a job for life in the context of the economic crisis in which we live:

"I will continue to dedicate myself to this and do it to the best of my ability. If I have to take the exam every two years in order to be able to work in teaching, I will do it. Besides, I don't know if I would know how to do anything else after so many years of doing this." (Emma)

"Not knowing whether you will be working next year or not, where you will have to live, preparing for the exam again [...]. All of this discourages me a lot. But I am encouraged to know that, if I get the job, I will have a job for life and that gives me the strength to go on." (Javier)

The participants in our study face a daily dichotomy between theory and practice that leads them to reject study for the public examination and the development of their didactic programming as activities of professional growth and pedagogical enrichment, which feeds back into these feelings of insecurity that negatively condition their personal and professional identity (González-Calvo, 2020). Nor do they believe that the system, and in particular the syllabus, responds to content that is relevant and meaningful for their profession or even for students. As a result, the admission process is far removed from the real problems they face on a daily basis in their profession, and needs to be updated to provide greater motivation and reinforce their reflective and investigative spirit.

Temporary status as an impediment to teaching commitment

The status of contract teacher in Spain implies that the teacher can work throughout the school year in the same school, or work in different schools as a substitute for a fixed period of time. In both cases, at the end of the school year, the teacher will be put back into a job bank and it will not be until the beginning of the following school year that he/she will know if and where he/she has been assigned to a school. This temporary situation makes it difficult for our participants to commit themselves to the school and to teaching, as they see themselves as "temporary teachers":

"I feel that, year after year, I lose my passion for teaching. My motivation is not the same as it was years ago, I feel more tired, more frustrated. Being in a different place every year means that I don't get as involved as I used to because, after all, what I do now won't have continuity next year. So, although there are things I would like to do, as they involve a lot of time and effort and little reward, I don't." (Patricia)

"It is not easy to have a say in the cloisters when you are a 'passing' teacher in the school. There are aspects that are debated and that have an impact on school life in the long term, but how can I give my opinion on these issues if next year I don't know if I will be in the same school or not?" (Javier)

"I am totally committed to teaching. But it is true that there are things I could do, like coordinating workshops, volunteering to go on different excursions [...] but I don't do them because I am not part of the culture of the centre as much as other colleagues are." (Olivia)

Although the temporary situation leads to less commitment to the projects carried out in the school, the contract status implies greater pressure in the classroom and a greater burden of trying to meet the expectations expected of an educator. This situation leads to teaching

stress more typical in the early years of the profession (Helms-Lorenz et al., 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2016), which, nevertheless, these educators continue to experience today. This teaching stress is characterised by a lack of energy, by the development of negative attitudes towards others and by a feeling of inadequacy in relation to their own work (Cano-García et al., 2005; Yavuz, 2009) which, again, hinders commitment to the profession:

> "I have to prove that I am as good an educator as anyone else, regardless of whether or not I have passed the public examination. You can't imagine the amount of time and effort that, fifteen years later, I still dedicate to preparing the lessons. [...] I feel overwhelmed almost all the year and, moreover, I am convinced that the management teams sometimes put more pressure on me in the preparation and presentation of the teaching programmes than on my permanent colleagues at the school." (Adrián)

> "I work very hard during the course and also when it comes to the dreaded public examinations. I go through very stressful periods, which increase proportionally when the exam date approaches or when I am waiting to be called to work in a new centre. Sometimes I think that if I have to continue under this level of stress, my health will suffer." (Patricia)

The teaching stress of our participants is characterised by a lack of energy, by the development of negative attitudes towards others and by a feeling of inadequacy in relation to their own work (Laval & Dardot, 2018) which, again, hinders commitment to the profession and has obvious repercussions on personal life. Thus, teachers postpone what they see as a meaningful life for the sake of future fulfilment and job security, which encourages them to endure the fear, increasingly prevalent as time goes on, that they will never fully achieve the goal.

Personal and professional dilemmas in the life of a contract teacher

On a personal level, a common area of concern for participants relates to their age and loss of fitness over time. Body ideals, increasingly present in body culture, are partly constructed inside and outside schools (Shilling, 2010). These ideals are legitimised in the profession of physical education:

> "There are certain body ideals that, due to my age, I am no longer embodying. Although I take care of myself and lead a healthy life, the way the system is set up, it is inevitable that I will be left out of it a bit." (Javier)

> "I consider myself in good physical condition, with good motor skills [...]. But I am worried that the selection panel that assesses me will question my eligibility on the basis of my age. It seems that this is a profession where being young is more highly valued." (Olivia)

Eman (2012) speaks of 'age of ability', which is assessed primarily through comparisons of current physical experiences with previous abilities and with the abilities of others. Until not so long ago, the admission system to the teaching profession introduced, as part of the selective process, tests for physical fitness and motor skills.[2] These tests —and today there are plans to reintroduce them— favour a docile body, easily subjected, transformed and perfected (Foucault, 1979). The uncertainty surrounding the return of physical tests to the selection process undermines the personal and professional identity of the participants:

> "If the physical tests were to return, as it is believed they will, it would not be a fair situation. I am no longer 20 years old, I am not in the same physical condition as I used to be, I can't compete with those who have just finished their degree. What can I do if the physical standards return?" (Paula)

> "I have already faced the physical entrance exams on several occasions. Although I didn't notice them at the time, probably because I was young and passed them without difficulty, today I consider them to be unfair. I don't think I will be able to pass the tests at this stage, so they will act as a sieve so that only young teachers will be able to teach physical education." (Nicolás)

[2] Until 2003, aspiring teachers had to pass a physical test consisting of an agility circuit, driving and kicking a ball with the feet, an aerobic endurance test and a body expression test. There is currently a debate as to whether these tests, which in the case of physical education teachers at secondary level (from 12 to 16 years of age) are ongoing, should be reintroduced into the selection procedure.

Gubrium & Holstein (2003) rightly criticise the common view of ageing bodies as a pervasive phenomenon when, in fact, in many everyday interactions it is sometimes "invisible". The body is an object of experience whose visibility is determined by the action of acquiring meaning in specific contexts where the body is directly encountered in particular ways by the self and others. This is the case for some of our participants:

> "When the time comes to take the exam, I look at the rest of the applicants, and I realise that I am usually one of the oldest. [...] Being older is relative, something that is constituted in interaction and that takes on context in relation to other people. And, in this context, surrounded by people several years younger, it makes me feel out of place." (Alberto)

At other times, participants have feelings of anger and shame, stemming from sharing cultural standards of healthy and eternally youthful bodies that denote a perfect appearance (Charmaz, 1995). There is anger at not meeting those standards:

> "I have a struggle against my own body, I look much older than the rest. And although it is true that the loss of physical condition is not very noticeable and does not influence the examinations, the truth is that it makes me feel somewhat self-conscious. [...] But I can't fight against age, I can only give up or move on." (Nicolás)

> "I'm very accepting of myself and the passage of time. I don't have any complexes, I don't feel old or anything like that [...]. Although when I see other opponents I realise that they are younger, they seem 'healthier', they are 'fitter', I feel a bit excluded." (Leire)

These ideas confirm that identity change generally takes place through three parallel processes: a personal process, an interpersonal process and an intercultural process (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Another key issue in the lives of contract teachers has to do with the uncertainty of knowing whether or not they will be able to work next school year and, if so, where. This situation presents them with a number of dilemmas that make it difficult for them to reconcile their personal and professional lives:

> "In recent years, thanks to the fact that I have enough points on the list of contracts, I have been offered a job close to my home. It is not like in the beginning, when I had to travel many kilometres to work. Now there are things I can consider that were difficult before, such as having children. [...] Although now, with the economic crisis, I'm a bit scared about whether they will cut staff, whether I'll be able to work, and that also conditions my life projects." (Hugo)

> "It's annoying when the summer comes and you're unemployed, not knowing whether you'll be working next year or not. In my case, I have had no shortage of work for years, but now it is different. They are cutting staff, I find it hard to explain that I am unemployed again until they call me back to work... When summer comes, I cry because of it." (Adrián)

> "I don't like summers at all, let alone people thinking I'm lucky to be a teacher and have two months' holiday. It is a time of fears, of not knowing whether I will work or not, where I will be sent, how I am going to organise my personal life with work [...]. Other things, such as buying a car or a house, are also complicated, because it is a non-stable job that makes it difficult to borrow money. All this, on a psychological level, is not easy to cope with." (Emma)

Although all the participants emphasise that they feel well valued by their students and by the families of the students, they suffer and/or have suffered situations in which they have felt undervalued due to their temporary status and the little support they have received from the management teams. This situation of loneliness generates a certain mistrust towards teamwork and towards the teaching profession in general:

> "It's not that I feel mistreated or anything like that, but the management team has not behaved well and neither have my colleagues. I have been left with the worst groups, the most troubled pupils [...]. I don't deserve this treatment, but the centre treats all of us who are contract teachers like this." (Javier)

> "I do feel I am treated worse because I am a contract teacher. From the way courses are chosen, when I am always the last one chosen, to making some derogatory comments to me because of my status as a temp." (Paula)

The participants accept with reluctance that, despite having several years of experience behind them (in many cases, more than the rest of the colleagues in the centre and even the management teams), they are always considered "the last ones", which generates feelings of insecurity and loneliness:

> "It hurts me to be treated like a rookie who has just arrived. I always get the groups that others don't want to go near because they are difficult. They don't make things too easy for me, or even patronise me for being the eternal temp." (Rodrigo)

> "There are all sorts of things. I have felt very comfortable in several of the schools I have been in. Although it's true that, in general, I have that feeling of being the last. [...] I'm not bitter about it either, I know it's something common in this profession and that's it." (Olivia)

The subjectivities of these teachers are continually changing and, as fluids, they do not remain in any one form for long and need to be constantly prepared (and prone) to change (Bauman, 2000). They prioritised their professional subjectivities over their personal ones. As having a permanent job in Spain can give a sense of long-term security, they aspired to get one, even if it was necessary to undergo the stressful ordeal of gaining a permanent teaching post several times (González-Calvo, 2020). Productive times in which haste works mean that teachers have to live in a rushed and fast-pace way, where there is no time for everything.

Conclusions

This article has addressed the concerns and particularities of a group of teachers with several years of experience in the profession who, despite this, do not have a permanent position in public education. From the dialogue that emerged in the interviews and the reflection of the participants, we understand that giving voice to these educators serves to reconstruct and re-examine their professional identity (Ambler, 2012; Pritzker, 2012), revealing their fears, hopes and uncertainties. The stories of these participants thus help to build their professional identity by bringing to light their strengths and weaknesses, finding new ways of approaching pedagogical practice and connecting these with their day-to-day classroom experiences.

When we considered studying the personal and professional identity of teachers with several years of experience as temporary teachers, a very common situation in Spain, we chose teachers with at least fifteen years of teaching experience. This extensive experience, coupled with the fact that the administration does not recognise these professionals as "teachers in their own right", gives rise to dilemmas and conflicts about their chosen profession. Thus, in all the participants we have found a special way of looking at and dealing with educational phenomena, as subjectively experienced phenomena that affect their personal and professional identity: interpersonal relationships with other colleagues, management teams, feelings of insecurity and incompetence in relation to others, feelings of isolation and loneliness, are phenomena that need to be thought about and understood, as they leave their mark on professional identity and, in many cases, make a dent in it.

Although this study is based only on 12 teaching professionals from their own personal and professional experiences, the findings support similar results found by other authors (e.g. Cañadas et al., 2019; González-Calvo, 2020; O'Connor, 2008; Watson, 2006; Zembylas, 2004), so they may be applicable to other studies and nationalities. The data in this study aim to shed light on the admission system for the teaching profession in Spain and to understand the relationship between the system and teaching identity. The study can also serve as a framework for conceptualising the experiences of long-term contract teachers for the benefit of all those involved in teaching and education.

This is a significant contribution to the existing literature on this topic, as it also delves into the personal sphere of how teachers deal with the process of obtaining a permanent teaching position. It also allows us to reflect on what 'true educational quality' is, conditioned to a large extent by the instability of teaching that emerges with current neoliberal education policies (Luna, 2015). Our schools deserve well-trained teachers who invest in their pedagogical training because they have the certainty of a permanent position and job security for years to come. Similarly, our children deserve motivated professionals who enjoy teaching without needing to worry about their employment status. When the government does not make a firm commitment to quality public education, and budget restrictions are put in place in various areas, we are impoverishing ourselves as a society. This, which undoubtedly serves clear economic interests, commodifies a profession as important and responsible as that of teaching. Sadly, teachers have to be more concerned about whether their job will be renewed the following year than about carrying out their teaching profession with peace of mind and security.

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