

ANALYSING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL STATUS OF TEACH- ING FROM THE VISUAL RHETORICS OF CHILEAN DIGITAL PRESS

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This study examines how the teaching profession is visually narrated in Chilean digital news media, and how these rhetorics contribute to the construction of teachers' social status. Situated within global concerns regarding teacher recruitment and retention, the study focuses on media imagery as a key site where the social status of professions is produced and propagated.

Methods. The methodology is based on the visual rhetoric approach and involves the semiological analysis of a sample of 68 images published between 2022 and 2023 in two major Chilean digital news outlets. The analytical procedure comprised three phases: a denotative and descriptive analysis, a connotative analysis, and a final phase in which visual rhetorics were identified.

Results. The findings reveal three visual rhetorics: (a) teachers as educators, predominantly women engaged in traditional classroom roles centred on care and proximity; (b) teachers as union activists, largely narrated by men occupying leadership and spokesperson positions; and (c) teachers as undifferentiated protagonists, presented through portrait-style images that lack clear professional context, expertise, or collegiality.

Conclusions. This study is among the first to examine how visual rhetorics in the digital press shape the social status of teachers. These visual rhetorics contribute to the symbolic construction of the teaching profession's social status by reinforcing gendered divisions, emphasising care and activism over technical expertise, and silencing collaborative and specialised dimensions of professional practice. The findings highlight the role of press visual rhetorics in sustaining limited and traditionalised understandings of teaching, and, to some extent, to education, which contribute to the construction and dissemination of a diminished social status of the profession.

Keywords: teacher status, teacher prestige, visual rhetoric, teacher professionalism, visual representation of teachers, digital media

INTRODUCTION

The Crisis of the Teaching Profession

The teaching profession is currently undergoing a global crisis. There is tension between being a highly demanded and necessary role—especially considering the Sustainable Development Goals' advocacy for universal primary education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023)—and the persistent decline in its social status and prestige (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024; Education International and Education and Solidarity Network, 2023; Pont, 2021). Consequently, the number of individuals choosing to enter or remain in the pro-

profession is steadily decreasing worldwide. By 2030, the projected global shortage of primary and secondary school teachers will reach 44 million, including more than 3 million in Latin America and 32,000 in Chile (Elige Educar, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

Evidence for the teachers' low social status is growing. Teachers themselves perceive their status as low and in decline: in 2018, a global survey among teachers' unions found that 45% of educators perceived their status as low or very low (Stromquist, 2018). This figure rose to 62% in 2021 (Thompson, 2021) and to 69% by 2024 (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024). In Latin America, 75% of teachers believe that authorities neither value, respect, nor trust their work — factors that significantly influence both teacher retention and recruitment (Hernández-Silva et al., 2016). In Chile, data from the 2018 Global Teacher Status Index study confirmed that the public holds teachers in relatively low regard. Respondents ranked teachers with only 33 points out of a total possible of 100 on the index; out of the 35 countries included in the study, Chile was ranked 22nd in terms of perceived teacher status. The same study found that worldwide only 25% of the surveyed population believed that students respect their teachers (Dolton et al., 2018).

The decline in professional status is multifactorial. One research strand highlights tangible factors such as comparatively low salaries (Nguyen & Hernández, 2020; Saavedra et al., 2025), limited career progression, and classroom stress linked to illness and leave (OECD, 2025; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Another line stresses the role of social discourses and media portrayals of teachers' traits and roles, showing a steady deterioration in representations, particularly via cultural and digital media, which shapes perceived status (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024). Aligned with this body of research, the present study seeks to contribute to understanding how the Chilean press visually constructs the teaching profession and which aspects of social status are highlighted or omitted. Specifically, it examines the “visual rhetorics” (Danesi, 2017) employed in two Chilean digital media outlets between 2022 and 2023, focusing on the representations and discourses concerning the social status of teachers. This approach, novel within the context of these studies, is based on the premise that the meanings attributed to objects and social agents increasingly originate from visual information (Harper, 2023).

Teachers' Professional Status

Social status is understood as a schema of implicit sociocultural beliefs about the level of respect and social influence attributed to a group, which forms and actualises through a permanent process of signal exchange in social relationships (Bendersky & Pai, 2018). Status is a key element for professions as macrosocial structures, as it is closely tied to their appeal, their expected performance, and the entry of new members into the profession (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024; Bellei & Valenzuela,

2013). This effect may be explained by the fact that individuals choose higher-status professions to gain or preserve that advantage for themselves (Kemper, 2016). Referring to “higher” status implies that status is a positional attribute that structures relationships of superiority, equality, or inferiority among actors and professions, based on beliefs about who is more valuable and competent (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022).

Status characteristics theory posits that professions are assigned social status based on traits extrapolated from broader social groups and individuals with high or low social status (Ridgeway, 2018). These traits serve as recognised indicators of advantage or disadvantage, and expected behaviour, often linked to social categories such as race, gender or age (Webster & Slattery Walker, 2022).

The theory also accounts for status characteristics that explain inequities within a hierarchy among professions (Webster & Slattery Walker, 2022). For example, gender influences professional status along lines of male social advantage: male-dominated fields typically are more valued, offer higher salaries and enjoy higher status. In contrast, female-dominated professions, often tied to caregiving and education, are undervalued, underpaid, and subject to devaluation and proletarianisation—facing poorer working and salary conditions (Busch, 2018; Korlat et al., 2023).

Visually communicable characteristics play a critical role in the continual reconstruction of a profession’s image in a society that places growing importance on visual environments. Starting with attire, as a status characteristic is associated with economic advantage or disadvantage, as well as with the influence and power of particular groups (Gouda-Vossos et al., 2019). For example, individuals wearing formal business suits or white coats (e.g., doctors) are generally perceived as having higher status, while those in casual clothing or uniforms linked to less prestigious roles (e.g., mechanics) are perceived as having lower status (Dong et al., 2024; Gouda-Vossos et al., 2019). Even dress colour and style can influence status attribution, with bright colours and extravagant clothing often being associated with creativity, freedom, and innovation—and, in turn, with higher status (Marx, 2022).

In visual depictions, characteristics can also be linked to body posture, which communicates degrees of influence or leadership in social dynamics. Individuals displaying expansive postures—such as extended limbs occupying space, an upright head position, initiating action, or capturing others’ attention—are associated with higher status, as these features convey social dominance (Cheng et al., 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Yet, the visual communication of possessing scientific knowledge and high-level expertise, specialisation, and familiarity with cutting-edge technology all contribute to the social status associated with the competence of professional groups (Kostytsky et al., 2020). Although recent decades have seen a documented change in the monopoly and value of professional knowledge (Bellini & Maestrepieri, 2023; Leicht & Fennel, 2023), specialisation and technological prowess still distinguish professionals and often place them in positions of “technoleadership” and a powerful “technological elite” within society (Gerrard & Holloway, 2023; Holloway, 2021). In this sense, technologi-

cal advancement is associated with wealth and influence and transfers its high-status attribute to those who act upon the world through its use and mastery (Kurtz, 2022).

Literature suggests that visual press portrayals of teachers must be analysed within national contexts to understand their link to attributed status and their potential influence on the profession's appeal (Webster & Slattery Walker, 2022). Analysing patterns and discourses in visual portrayals of teachers will offer insights into the shifting nature of status, influence, and power in the teaching profession as institutional patterns (Kemper, 2016).

Mediatisation and Digital Press

The construction of meanings surrounding the teaching profession through visual means is closely linked to a process of increasing (Hepp, 2019). mediatisation is understood as the process by which the media—comprising a multi-semiotic blend of texts and images—interprets and influences multiple aspects of social life by selecting what constitutes “news”, “novelty”, and “reality”. This process emphasises present-oriented, change-driven, and exceptional events over others (Baroutsis, 2019; Hepp, 2019). By framing teachers' characteristics and professional practices, the media influences public behaviour and provides the interpretive structures through which people assess and question the profession's societal role and value (Kim et al., 2023; Mockler, 2022; Powers & Chapman, 2021). Within this process, media outlets portray teachers as social agents, reflecting the media's own cultural standpoint—not merely representing them, but creating realities both about and for them (Beiguelman, 2023; Pauwels, 2015).

A growing body of research examines media portrayals of teachers, primarily through textual discourse analysis of news content, opinion pieces, and reports (Alhamdan et al., 2014; Correa & Flórez, 2022; Mockler, 2022; Pechinkina & Vepreva, 2022), with limited attention to visual images (Barnes, 2021; Oxley & Kim, 2023). These studies reveal a progressive deterioration of teacher image in media discourse, increasingly aligning teachers with negative narratives, particularly in the context of educational reform (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024; Ewing et al., 2021; Powers & Chapman, 2021; Ridgway, 2018). Such representations affect the broader educational subsystem, as teachers symbolise the school institution and mediate its relationship with society—a relationship that has become more strained in recent decades, including in Chile (Acero, 2023; Pechinkina & Vepreva, 2022). Cross-national findings reinforce this trend: in Sweden, Lithuania, and Colombia, teachers are often depicted as lacking competence (Bilbokaitė & Bilbokaitė-Skiauterienė, 2017; Correa & Flórez, 2022; Edling & Liljestrang, 2021) while, in Australia, despite the profession's feminisation, media images tend to feature male teachers (Mockler, 2022).

There are, however, some positive representations of teachers in the press. For example, Bandar Alhamdan et al. (2014) developed typologies of verbally narrated teacher

representations in the media, including the caring practitioner, the transparent (un)professional, the teacher as moral and social role model, and the teacher as a transformative intellectual. Often positive narratives are found alongside negative ones: on the one hand, teachers may be portrayed as heroes (Palacios et al., 2022); on the other, they are represented as villains (Oxley & Kim, 2023; Pechinkina & Vepreva, 2022; Powers & Chapman, 2021). This trend was reflected in COVID-19-related news, where some coverage presented teachers in a positive light, depicting them as dedicated and heroic in their professional roles (Baroutsis, 2019), but other coverage portrayed teachers as alarmist and lazy for opposing the reopening of schools (Kim et al., 2023).

Far fewer studies analyse both text and image in digital media to describe the social representations of the teaching profession. Rebecca A. Goldstein's (2011) frame analysis of news coverage during educational reforms, examining both verbal and visual content, showed that visual elements were employed to demonise certain teachers (e.g., unionised teachers depicted as bullies or even terrorists) and elevate others (e.g., new, 'better' teachers portrayed as young, white, and smiling). The studies by Goldstein (2011) and Theresa Catalano and Lauren Gatti (2016)—although lacking methodological detail regarding visual analysis—reveal similar findings concerning how digital media highlighted negative aspects of the teaching profession.

Another visual analysis was conducted by Jari Martikainen (2019), who examined the rhetoric present in covers of Finland's teachers' union magazine, focusing on both plastic and iconic elements as well as denoted and connoted meanings. His findings revealed representations of a feminised profession constructed through four visual rhetorics: (a) experts, (b) jokers, (c) recreationists, and (d) educators—highlighting the heterogeneous and contrasting nature of teachers' visual portrayals.

In Chile, a 2011 study focused on textual analysis using critical discourse methods to report a negative bias in media portrayals of teachers, characterising them as overwhelmed, irritable, and mistreated (Cabezas & Claro, 2011). Another study examining how the media constructed teacher identity in the context of discussions on a new *Ley de Carrera Docente* (Teaching Career Law, Law N° 20.903) highlighted narratives of depersonalisation—where teachers were generalised as docile social actors subject to state-imposed technical regulations—and of depoliticisation, framing them as removed from collective action (Cabalín et al., 2019).

The most extensive review in Chile was conducted by Antonio Ramón Salazar Delgado (2019), who analysed socially constructed representations in press texts between 2009 and 2016. The thematic categories expressed a critical and negative view of the teaching role in public education, and of collective teacher action during protests related to education reform (Salazar Delgado, 2019).

Finally, presenting a more balanced view of the profession, a study analysed media discourses that depicted teachers as key agents in the “modernisation of the state” (Fernández Ugalde, 2024). Although this research found depictions of teachers as nation-builders, it also highlighted the media's tendency to perpetuate negative images

of public-school teachers by contrasting them with the supposed efficiency of those from the private sector—thus reinforcing the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” teachers.

Taken together, the literature on teacher status, media representations, and visual rhetoric has largely developed along parallel lines. Studies on professional status have emphasised structural conditions and social beliefs, while research on media portrayals of teachers has focused predominantly on textual discourse. By bringing these strands into dialogue, this study contributes a novel analytical perspective that integrates status characteristics theory with visual rhetoric to examine how the teaching profession and, to some extent, also education, is symbolically constructed through images. This intersection is particularly relevant for understanding education as a cultural field, insofar as visual representations not only reflect prevailing beliefs about teaching but actively participate in shaping the symbolic conditions under which educational work is valued, legitimised, and made socially meaningful.

This study seeks to fill that gap by addressing the following questions: How are teachers visually narrated? Which status characteristics are emphasised or silenced? How do these visual rhetorics contribute to the symbolic construction of teaching as a profession and, in extension, to the education social subsystem? From a critical perspective, examining these visual rhetorics generates knowledge that can inform future efforts to erode undesirable stereotypes and to reframe how teachers are visually narrated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological Approach

This study adopts the visual rhetoric (VR) approach to analyse images of teachers in Chilean digital press. VR are understood as the study of representations conveyed visually and structured around a limited set of shared and consensual characteristics (Danesi, 2017; Martikainen, 2019). From this perspective, images in digital press are not conceived as neutral records of reality, but rather as intentional constructions designed to convey specific meanings, persuade audiences, and shape perceptions (Danesi, 2018; Martikainen, 2019). In this regard, images do not merely communicate but also structure and hierarchise meaning, influencing emotions and thoughts by persuading individuals directly through iconic and plastic signs (Harper, 2023). These signs evoke frameworks of meaning acquired through social life and shape decisions, preferences, and expectations of individuals embedded within a given cultural context (Bendersky & Pai, 2018). Moreover, visual rhetorics may also silence constitutive aspects of individuals or groups, thereby contributing to the confirmation of stereotypes and the invisibilisation or denial of characteristics related to their social status and their evolution (Martikainen, 2019).

Data

The selection of digital media outlets was based on inclusion criteria related to readership. According to Reuters, 85% of news media consumption in Chile occurs via online platforms, with 78% on mobile devices. The most widely used digital news sources are *EMOL* (the digital platform of *El Mercurio Online*), *La Tercera*, and subsequently *Las Últimas Noticias* (hereinafter *LUN*) (Newman et al., 2022). Due to access restrictions to *La Tercera*'s image archive for the year 2022 (from the structure of the search engine of the online portal), the analysis focused on the digital portals of *EMOL* and *LUN* between January 2022 and December 2023. The initial corpus was selected based on searches of the respective websites using three key words to denote teachers in Chile: *docentes*, *profesores* and *profesoras*. The search yielded 199 images; those lacking an anthropomorphic representation of teachers were excluded, leaving a refined corpus of 147 images. A simple random sampling method was then applied (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), and 50% of the total corpus (N = 147) was selected to ensure analytical manageability while allowing for sufficient variation and thematic saturation across visual rhetorics, in line with established practices in visual rhetoric research. Six images were excluded for depicting professionals from other sectors, resulting in a final analytical sample of 68 images, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Populations and samples of images from digital press media

Media	Year	Teacher		Male teachers		Female teachers		Total		Uni-verse	Final sample
		Uni-verse	Sam-ple	Uni-verse	Sam-ple	Uni-verse	Sam-ple	Uni-verse	Sam-ple		
EMOL.cl	2022	25	25	60	52	7	7	92	84	119	56
	2023	12	5	39	29	7	1	58	35		
LUN.cl	2022	14	11	10	7	0	0	24	18	28	12
	2023	25	10	0	0	0	0	25	10		
Total								199	147		68

Source. Authors' own elaboration.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis employed an adapted version of the three-phase semiological model for visual rhetoric proposed by Michelle Greenwood et al. (2018), based on the work of Roland Barthes (1977). The analytical stages were as follows:

Phase I: During this phase, iconographic denotative content was analysed; in other words, the literal visual elements of each image were systematically identified and coded,

without interpretation of their symbolic or cultural meanings. To conduct the analysis, a codebook was developed by the authors based on a literature review of typical characteristics denoting social status. The codebook was validated by three independent researchers from the fields of education and semiology. The final version comprised 75 codes for visual elements grouped into 18 categories, such as *teacher position*, *teacher attire*, *teacher age*, *interior space*, and *objects*. For data coding, each image was coded independently by two of the authors using Atlas.ti software (version 9.1). To ensure the reliability of the process, each coder recorded the assigned codes in an intercoder agreement table. The overall intercoder agreement rate, i.e., the percentage of instances in which both coders assigned the same code to iconic elements in the images, was 95.2%.

Phase 2: During this phase of connotative analysis, each image was analysed again, focusing on the deeper meanings, associations, or ideas that it may suggest, while paying particular attention to themes within the chosen conceptual framework (Greenwood et al., 2018). This analysis was conducted by the authors in a face-to-face meeting to reach a consensus for each image regarding how it should be classified and interpreted. An analysis for each image was recorded.

Phase 3: In the final phase, the first author developed a rhetorical visual analysis of the categories; whilst this analysis drew on the iconic and thematic analyses, it focused on how the images convey influential or persuasive messages about teacher status in the Chilean cultural context (Greenwood et al., 2018). The written rhetorical analysis was shared with the other authors, who added feedback, and a final consensus was reached.

FINDINGS

The analysis was conducted in sequential analytical phases. First, a descriptive examination of the visual corpus was undertaken in order to identify the distribution and relative frequency of visual codes across images. This initial phase provides an overview of recurring visual patterns related to teachers' roles, settings, and interactions, and is synthesised in Figure 1. Building on this descriptive foundation, the analysis then advances to the identification and interpretation of three dominant visual rhetorics through denotative, connotative, and rhetorical analysis. These rhetorics portray teachers as (a) undifferentiated protagonists, (b) teachers of students, and (c) agents of union activism.

Figure 1 presents a radial visualisation of the distribution and relative frequency of visual codes identified across the analysed image corpus in phase 1. In the figure, each column represents the percentage of images in which each code is present, ranging from zero (0%) to one (100%). The background colours were added to differentiate the categories described above and around the graph. Overall, the visualisation highlights a strong concentration of codes associated with care, proximity, and traditional classroom contexts, alongside a markedly lower presence of codes linked to technological expertise, professional collaboration, and specialised knowledge. Rather

Following the analyses conducted in Phase 2 and Phase 3, the study identified three dominant visual rhetorics:

Rhetoric 1: Teachers as Undifferentiated Protagonists

From a visual rhetoric perspective, this corpus presents a tribute to the experienced teacher that is recognisable as a near individual within a professional collective marked by homogeneity, orderliness, restraint, and neutrality. This visual construction is ambivalent: while it grants visibility and protagonism in the press, it does so according to rigid and unchanging aesthetic norms, with an almost total absence of social or professional status markers. There are no contextual or occupational references, closely aligning with Alhamdan et al.'s (2014) notion of the transparent (un)professional.

A key feature of this rhetoric is the portrait, which communicates proximity. This format conveys a sense of prominence, intimacy, and complicity with the viewer, with whom the teachers make direct eye contact, but also the absence of roles, functions, or social contexts of action. Furthermore, the teacher is not represented as part of a specialised collective (Lucaites & Hariman, 2001) but rather as an undifferentiated individual.

From a rhetorical perspective, this form of portraiture produces an ambivalent construction of status. Teachers are made visible as individuals, yet this visibility is achieved through aesthetic restraint and visual standardisation that minimises markers of expertise, specialisation, or collective professional identity. Rather than signalling authority or innovation, these images emphasise neutrality and respectability, aligning with notions of the “transparent (un)professional” and contributing to a flattened representation of professional status.

This category comprises 27 images, portraying 16 women and 12 men, thus reflecting a slight female predominance. Most of the teachers portrayed are middle-aged (over 50 years old). Seven of the 27, all women, are younger; no young men are depicted. In these photographs showing the upper body (from the waist up), no consistent pattern of posture is observed; subjects pose with both constrictive and expansive body language. Although portraiture typically signals protagonism, some of the postures appear passive or subject to the framing of the camera, resulting in a certain ambiguity in their protagonism and, consequently, in the social status they convey.

All subjects are well-groomed, with neatly styled hair. The men are consistently shown with short, greying hair, which may be interpreted as a sign of experience. Women over 50, unlike men, are likely to dye their hair to conceal greying, reflecting a pattern of gendered experience of ageing in Chile, where women's higher social status is often linked to a more youthful appearance (Vergara et al., 2020; Vergara, 2017).

Regarding attire, all subjects present a neat, orderly appearance with neutral and dark colours—primarily blue, grey, and black—often contrasted with white in a conventional manner. None of the men wear earrings or visible accessories. In general, both

hair styling and clothing reflect a restrained and neutral visual presentation, with no extravagant elements. The absence of distinctive or transgressive features in attire reinforces an image that silences individuality, creativity, or high-status cues often associated with figures of elevated social standing.

Rhetoric 2: Teachers as Teachers of Students

Twenty-two of the 68 images analysed correspond to this rhetoric, which portrays teachers in classrooms or school settings alongside young students (under 10 years of age). This visual rhetoric constructs teaching primarily as a relational and embodied practice, grounded in proximity, care, and immediate interaction with students. Teachers are visually positioned as central figures within pedagogical scenes that emphasise presence, attentiveness, and control of the instructional moment. The classroom is not merely a setting but a symbolic space in which authority is exercised through bodily engagement and affective closeness, rather than through displays of specialised knowledge or technical expertise.

Within this rhetoric, professionalism is articulated through moral and relational attributes—commitment, dedication, and responsibility—rather than through markers of innovation, collaboration, or institutional complexity. Teaching is thus narrated as an individualised and situational practice, anchored in the teacher’s physical presence and interpersonal skills. While this construction affirms the social value of care and relational work, it simultaneously circumscribes the profession within a narrow symbolic frame that marginalises its knowledge-intensive, collective, and technologically mediated dimensions. These portrayals highlight both the instructional role of teachers and the insular nature of the profession, as previously identified in research on teaching (Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2020).

Of the visible teachers, 19 are women and 11 men, indicating a relatively feminised professional role. Clothing is predominantly dark and neutral tones such as grey, blue, and black, or a *delantal* (a kind of light smock typically used by teachers in Chile), and evokes seriousness, sobriety, and traditionalism.

From the preceding denotative and connotative analysis, a rhetoric emerges that portrays teaching as a slightly feminised profession that conveys sobriety and tradition alongside warmth, enjoyment, and harmony in the teacher–student relationship. This bears resemblance to the “caring practitioner” figure described by Alhamdan et al. (2014). The teacher’s role is to guide or accompany student learning in well-structured and orderly educational spaces. Teaching is centred on the teacher’s presence and active engagement, with books and whiteboards reinforcing a stereotype that lacks more advanced technical or pedagogical tools.

The visual simplicity of the teaching practices depicted stands in contrast to recent educational reforms, which demand significant pedagogical and technological

sophistication; Chile has a mandatory five-year university-based teacher professionalisation process. In essence, the profession is portrayed as a form of professionalism rooted in physical presence and situational leadership, relying on the body as the main tool. This depiction distances the teacher from positions of institutional power, high-level technological expertise, or collaboration with other adults, which would signal teamwork.

Rhetoric 3: Teachers as Agents of Union Activism

This rhetorical construction includes 14 of the 68 analysed photographs. A total of 90 teachers are clearly identifiable in these images. In contrast to the previous rhetorics, the majority are men (52 men and 38 women), portrayed in nearly all cases through close-up and centred shots, signifying their union leadership prominence.

This visual rhetoric constructs teachers primarily as political actors whose professional identity is articulated through public visibility, collective mobilisation, and discursive contestation. Teaching is displaced from pedagogical and institutional settings and re-situated within public and semi-public spaces, where authority is exercised through speech, protest, and representation rather than through instructional practice. In these images, the profession becomes legible to the public primarily in moments of conflict, demand, and negotiation.

Symbolically, this rhetoric foregrounds a tension between individual authority and collective anonymity. On the one hand, leadership figures are visually elevated through close framing, frontal positioning, and performative bodily gestures, producing a recognisable figure of spokespersonship and experience. On the other hand, the broader collective is frequently rendered as a depersonalised mass, visually abstracted through distance and scale. This dual construction simultaneously affirms teachers' capacity for political agency while dissolving professional specificity within a generalised collective body. Within this rhetorical configuration, teaching is narrated less as a knowledge-based or expert profession and more as a moral-political cause articulated through struggle and reinvincation.

Regarding attire, only four of the 90 individuals (all women) wear brightly coloured or extravagant clothing. The rest dress in neutral tones. Overall, the attire is traditional, sober, and neutral, thereby muting any vibrant or transgressive aesthetic. As with the previous rhetoric, body type, weight, and race appear regularised: individuals are of average size, with no racial diversity or references to disability depicted.

Here the rhetoric of teachers as agents of union activism features actors whose field of action is not professional or technical, but rather explicitly political, as agents of transformation that are engaged in collective actions for the benefit of the professional (Alhamdan et al., 2014). However, it may also be seen as positioning teachers outside their technical sphere of influence (the classroom, the school), potentially

diverting attention from their core transformative role (Kim et al., 2023). The rhetoric opens a space for considering ethical public dimensions within the teaching profession.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the image corpus from the Chilean digital press regarding teachers reveals a polysemic structure of visual rhetoric surrounding the profession and the social status characteristics. As the first study of its kind conducted in Chile, it highlights the importance of visual conventions in the broader analysis of social dynamics and processes that shape the teaching profession, particularly in relation to social status.

Taken together, the visual rhetorics identified in this study about teaching profession also participate in the broader symbolic construction of education itself. In contemporary media cultures, teachers function as highly recognisable visual icons through which education becomes socially legible. As such, the ways in which teachers are visually narrated extend beyond individual professional identities and contribute to shaping how pedagogical work, educational authority, and schooling as an institution are collectively imagined.

By foregrounding care, proximity, moral commitment, and political contestation—while marginalising expertise, collaboration, and knowledge-intensive practices—these visual rhetorics delimit the symbolic conditions under which pedagogical legitimacy is established. Teaching is rendered socially valuable, yet symbolically constrained, as authority is derived primarily from relational or moral attributes rather than from professional knowledge or institutional leadership. This configuration weakens the association between education and expert authority, potentially undermining public recognition of pedagogy as a specialised and intellectually demanding field.

These visual constructions also have implications for the attractiveness of teaching as a professional pathway. When education is visually embodied through figures that emphasise self-sacrifice, affective labour, or permanent struggle for recognition, the profession may appear socially necessary yet symbolically unrewarding. In this sense, the visual portrayal of teachers contributes to shaping aspirational horizons, influencing how future educators—and society more broadly—perceive the desirability, prestige, and authority of entering the teaching profession.

Understanding status as an axis that structures social relations of inequality, in a Weberian sense (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022), it is possible to observe characteristics of leadership and dominance in teaching situations, in the sense that they point to high social status. However, in general, teachers are often portrayed without the typical features associated with high-status groups, such as material possessions, formal attire, authority, competence, or innovation. In this regard, they are depicted in school buildings and playgrounds, surrounded by children. This imagery appeals more to characteristics of proximity (abundance of portraits points in that direction),

narrating a story of service, honour and dedication, or alternatively, one of political activism, protest, and demands for justice.

Contemporary formulations of status characteristics (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022) suggest that such portrayals and their rhetorics have the effect of keeping alive societal beliefs about teachers' subordinate position in professional hierarchies. Care, affection, self-sacrifice, closeness, and the struggle for recognition are all part of a schema that promotes the valuation of teachers' emotional commitment as the ideal of the profession—the 'good teachers'—while silencing traits associated with power, transgression, and high-level competence, typically attributed to higher-status professions. In this sense, by connoting care and commitment, these visual rhetorics encourage public respect and a sense of intimacy toward teachers, while simultaneously controlling and reinforcing their limited power and status in the name of moral virtue.

Three key findings are particularly noteworthy. One of them is the visual gendering of teachers: the rhetorics are not gender-neutral. Men account for 52% of the teachers represented in the image corpus. In a country where 78% of elementary and 56% of high school teachers are women (MINEDUC, 2022), this overrepresentation of men likely reflects and reinforces the already well-documented male dominance in public spaces, particularly in the media (Mockler, 2022).

Moreover, the roles in which teachers are depicted also display gender differentiation and stereotyping: men are more frequently shown in leadership and activist roles or teaching older students, whereas women are more often portrayed teaching and hugging young children—in other words, in caring and affectionate roles. These roles of care and affection thus participate in a broader and more traditionalist rhetoric about teaching: one that frames the profession as rooted in altruistic love, rather than as a domain that, due to its knowledge and expertise, demands authority and material recognition (Cheng et al., 2023; Korlat et al., 2023).

Secondly, the visual construction of teachers is characterised by a strong sense of neutrality and traditionalism, which is evident primarily in the homogeneity of their appearance, roles, and clothing. Teachers in images, mostly over 50, appear to embody a profession rooted in long-established norms, such as order, seriousness, neutrality, and conformity to traditional gender roles. This highlights the dimension of humanising and celebrating teachers as near members of the community in the foreground; while in the background, it develops the plot of individuals who call for trust and dedication, not ambition, status, or power. Regarding this, questions may be raised about the appeal and relatability of such representations for high school students considering a future in teaching.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the impact on teachers' social status of Rhetoric 3, which emphasises union activism and leadership, an aspect already documented in Chilean textual press analysis (Salazar Delgado, 2019). In other cultural contexts (Goldstein, 2011), collective teacher activism has been framed negatively as disruptive to public order. In Chile, there is a polarised tension on this rhetoric, with some

studies framing this role positively as a reassertion of the political and vindictory role of teachers (Acuña, 2022), while others critically view it as a stance against the public interest when strikes halt societal functioning (Salazar Delgado, 2019). Future extensions of this study could examine how this rhetoric influences public perceptions of teaching, particularly given its long-standing historical presence in Chile's professional landscape and the frequency of such rhetoric in national media.

The medium of photography, with its aura of realism, lends these patterns particular force: news images are widely perceived as windows onto "the way things are." Nevertheless, as semiotic analysis reminds us, these windows are mediated – composed through choices of framing, angle, context, and moment (Cagle, 2013). What we see (or cannot see) in a press photo is the result of editorial decisions steeped in convention and news values. Photographs of teachers are not just a mirroring of reality, but participants in the cultural production of meaning about education, labour, and inequality.

By unpacking the symbolic construction of the teacher's image through recurring visual rhetorics, we not only shed light on the specific issue of teacher status but also illustrate the power of images to uphold or challenge social hierarchies more generally. Future research might build on these insights by examining how intentional changes in visual narratives (for example, portraying teachers as skilled experts or leaders) could alter public perceptions and, potentially, the attraction of new candidates to the profession. For scholars and practitioners in visual sociology and education alike, this study serves as a reminder that seeing is not a neutral act – it is a culturally conditioned interpretation. In the realm of public imagery, as in society at large, who is seen, how they are seen, and in what context they are seen all communicate value. The case of teachers demonstrates that these visual messages have real stakes: they quietly participate in defining the prestige, authority, and esteem – in a word, the status – that our societies grant to those who educate the next generation.

This work opens a line of inquiry that may contribute to the development of a visual field in teacher professionalism studies, integrating semiotic analysis with debates on status and recognition politics. Its most relevant extrapolation lies in urging researchers, media professionals, policymakers, and union actors to engage critically with these visual constructions, recognising their influence not only on public perception but also on the profession's appeal and legitimacy. It seeks to foster a reflective dialogue that transcends the Chilean case and inspires similar explorations in other contexts, contributing to an international research agenda that recognises the performative power of imagery in the symbolic construction of essential social professions.

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