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**FROM SACRIFICE TO SHORTAGE:  
OR HOW WE CAN DEFEND PUBLIC EDUCATION BY RECONCEPTUALIZING  
TEACHERS' LABOR**

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School districts across the United States face the compounding crisis of a growing teacher shortage. While the precise scope of this shortage is difficult to measure (Garcia & Weiss, 2023; Steiner & Woo, 2021), its impacts are widely felt and well-documented: it disproportionately affects special education, rural and urban districts, and schools serving large numbers of students of color or students from low-income families (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

This is not a shortage of qualified teachers, but a shortage of teachers willing to work under current conditions. Low pay, unsustainable workloads, limited professional autonomy, and emotional exhaustion push educators out of the profession (Carver-Thomas, 2022; Papay et al., 2023; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). These deteriorating working conditions are not new—they are longstanding features of the U.S. education system—but they have reached a tipping point. Research from the RAND Corporation (2022) and the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) underscores that burnout, disillusionment, and political hostility drive unprecedented levels of attrition.

The consequences of this crisis are severe and far-reaching. The teacher shortage undermines student learning (Ladd & Sorensen, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019), weakens teacher effectiveness (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Kraft & Papay, 2014), and imposes significant economic burdens on school districts forced to repeatedly recruit and train new staff (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Because under-resourced schools are hit hardest, the shortage compounds racial and economic inequalities (Losen, 2024). Addressing this issue requires more than new certification pipelines—it demands a radical reimagining of the conditions under which teaching occurs.

Yet rather than investing in teacher support, many policymakers and think tanks have seized on the shortage as evidence that public education is inherently broken. This framing fuels a growing movement toward privatization, mainly through school voucher programs that redirect public funds to private institutions (Berkshire & Schneider, 2024; Stanford et al., 2024; Southern Education Foundation, 2023). Rooted in neoliberal ideology, this agenda frames market competition, not public investment, as the key to educational improvement (Harvey, 2007; Lipman, 2013; Au, 2022).

While voucher advocates claim to offer “choice,” this rhetoric obscures how disinvestment in public schools—and the poor working conditions it produces—has created the dysfunction privatizers point to as justification. Research consistently shows that vouchers do not improve student outcomes and often exacerbate segregation and inequality (Epple et al., 2017; Dynarski, 2018; NEPC, 2023). Meanwhile, studies confirm that sustained investment in teacher pay, professional development, and workplace conditions strengthens school quality and student learning (Harris & Sass, 2011; Kennedy, 2016; Malkus, 2022; Kraft et al., 2023).

In this context, the teacher shortage and the privatization movement form a destructive feedback loop. Poor working conditions push teachers out; public school quality declines; critics label schools as “failing”; and vouchers siphon off

even more resources, worsening the conditions driving the crisis (Bailey, 2024; Mast, 2023). At the center of this cycle is a devaluation of teacher labor that makes it easier to justify low pay, impossible expectations, and constant sacrifice.

This paper argues that this devaluation is not just economic or political but cultural. U.S. schools are built on a longstanding myth: teachers, particularly women, should work not for compensation, recognition, or sustainability, but out of selfless devotion to their students. This “martyr teacher” myth, while fictional, has real-world consequences. It naturalizes the idea that teachers should accept burnout and underpayment as moral duties rather than systemic failures. Represented in films like *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) and reinforced in everyday professional discourse, the martyr teacher is idealized for enduring impossible conditions with love and patience, rather than being supported with fair pay and humane workloads.

The martyr teacher figure is deeply gendered and racialized, emerging from a long history of labor expectations rooted in white, middle-class femininity (Apple, 1986; Grumet, 1988; Biklen, 1995; Clifford, 2014). This ideal constructs care work as an extension of white maternal virtue—selfless, morally pure, and incompatible with material reward. In doing so, it obscures the racial and class-based exclusions embedded in the image of the “ideal teacher,” while positioning suffering and self-sacrifice as evidence of moral worth. As a result, it becomes easier to justify systemic underinvestment in schools and to frame teachers’ overwork and exhaustion as noble rather than unjust.

This paper traces the historical and economic construction of the martyr teacher myth and analyzes how it became embedded in the institutional fabric of public education. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s (2002, 2006, 2013, 2019) critical posthumanist framework and the methodology of cartography, this study investigates the following research questions:

- How did the expectation for teachers to view their labor as a sacrifice become normalized?
- What power dynamics contributed to the formation of these expectations?
- What underlying logics support the notion of teachers’ sacrifice?

By exploring the evolution of these cultural and structural forces, this paper argues that the teacher shortage is not simply a labor market issue or a pandemic-era anomaly. It is a predictable outcome of decades of policy, ideology, and culture that treat teaching as a sacrificial vocation. Addressing this issue requires improved pay and working conditions and a fundamental redefinition of teachers’ labor. Such a redefinition offers a powerful pathway to strengthen teacher retention, resist privatization, and revitalize public education as a site of care, not depletion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: CONSEQUENCES OF THE MARTYR TEACHER MYTH**

Before tracing the historical evolution of the martyr teacher myth, it is essential to understand its contemporary consequences. Conceptualizing teaching as a sacrificial vocation manifests in two primary ways: chronic undercompensation and a culture of overwork that demands teachers do more with fewer resources—conditions that are well-documented drivers of the teacher shortage (Papay et al., 2023; Carver-Thomas, 2022; Sutchter et al., 2016; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001). The following section outlines how low pay and high stress contribute to teacher attrition by reinforcing the expectation of sacrifice.

### **Undercompensation and the Sacrificial Frame**

One of the clearest manifestations of the martyr teacher myth is the persistent undercompensation of educators in the United States. Framing teaching as a labor of love, rather than labor that deserves fair compensation, has long justified low wages. While there is extensive research on teachers’ undercompensation (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2016; Borman & Dowling, 2008), more recent analyses underscore just how deeply entrenched this pay gap has become. According to a national review of labor data, U.S. teachers earn 14.1% less than other college-educated workers, even after accounting for benefits and scheduled time off (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). In real terms, teacher salaries have declined: between 1993 and 2021, the compensation gap between teachers and their similarly educated peers widened by 11.5 percentage points (Garcia & Weiss, 2023). Simply put, American teachers earn less now than thirty years ago.

This pattern is not the global norm. Among 24 high-income countries and the European Union, the United States ranks last in relative teacher pay (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). The disparity becomes even more striking when adjusted for workload. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024), U.S. primary school teachers with 15 years of experience earn an average of \$54,686 annually—well below the OECD average and trailing countries like Australia, where reforms recently raised teacher salaries to approximately \$58,000 (The Times, 2024). Yet U.S. teachers spend significantly more time in the classroom than their peers abroad: about 1,100 hours per year for primary teachers, compared to the OECD average of 773. Lower secondary teachers in the U.S. teach around 1,050 hours annually, again far exceeding the OECD average of 706 hours. On an hourly basis, U.S. teachers are among the most underpaid educators in the developed world.

Despite incremental raises in some states, such as a 4.1% average increase in 2022–2023, teacher salaries still have not kept pace with inflation. According to the National Education Association (2024), the national average salary is 5% lower than a decade ago in real dollars, and starting salaries are nearly \$4,300 below 2008–2009 levels. These shortfalls are not simply the result of budget constraints or oversight; they are undergirded by a cultural narrative that frames teaching as a calling rather than a profession. The idea that teachers are motivated by care, love, or passion becomes a convenient rationale for systemic underinvestment.

The martyr teacher myth plays a central role in sustaining this logic. It casts teachers, especially women, as selfless nurturers whose personal well-being should always take a back seat to student needs. This cultural script helps normalize the idea that asking for more money or better working conditions is selfish or unprofessional. While versions of this expectation exist in other countries (Forrester, 2005), the U.S. context is particularly steeped in a moralizing rhetoric that treats sacrifice as a virtue and fair compensation as an indulgence. As a result, endemic undercompensation is not merely an economic failure; it is a feature of a profession shaped by gendered, moralized assumptions about what teachers should be willing to endure.

## The Emotional Cost of the Martyr Teacher Myth: Stress & Depression

While American teachers are sacrificing more time for less money, they are also sacrificing their mental and physical well-being. The emotional toll of teaching in today’s schools—often framed as “just part of the job”—is, in fact, a structural consequence of a profession built on the expectation of selflessness. Kyriacou (2001) defines teacher stress as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work” (p. 28). This stress is not merely a personal reaction to a demanding job but a systemic outcome of an education system that demands constant sacrifice.

**Pre-Pandemic Teacher Stress.** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, stress was a defining feature of U.S. teachers’ professional lives. The Economic Policy Institute’s comprehensive review identifies chronic stressors such as long hours, oversized classes, the need to work second jobs, high-stakes evaluation tied to standardized tests, loss of curriculum control, discrimination against teachers of color, and the politicization of classroom content (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). These conditions produce emotional exhaustion and professional dissatisfaction and drive teacher attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

The cumulative effect of these stressors is profound. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) found direct correlations between chronic workplace stress and burnout and diminished motivation to remain in the profession. Teachers often forgo essential self-care, like rest and recovery (Hersey, 2022), navigating escalating responsibilities (Apple, 2013), managing large class sizes, and absorbing the blame for systemic inequalities they cannot control. This stress is intensified by the racist and classist logics embedded in standardized testing (Au, 2022), which erode teacher autonomy and dignity. For teachers of color, the stress is further magnified by daily encounters with racial discrimination (Duncan, 2019), creating unsafe and unsupportive work environments.

In this context, the martyr teacher myth does more than justify low pay—it normalizes emotional sacrifice. Teachers are expected to pour themselves into their students, often at the expense of their own health. A 2013 Gallup poll reported that 46% of teachers felt stressed “a lot of the day,” a rate on par with nurses and higher than physicians, business owners, or service workers (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). While stress is widespread across many professions under late-stage capitalism, the intensity and consistency of stress in teaching point to a uniquely unsustainable labor model.

**Post-Pandemic Pressures.** The COVID-19 pandemic didn't create teacher stress, but accelerated and intensified it. By 2022, 73% of teachers reported frequent job-related stress, more than double that of other professions (RAND Corporation, 2022). Teachers were expected to perform additional unpaid labor, manage constant health risks, adapt to shifting digital platforms, and meet unrealistic accountability standards—all while facing worsening student behavior and increased scrutiny from parents and politicians (Bruno & Strunk, 2019).

The psychological effects have been devastating. That same RAND survey (2022) found 59% of teachers reporting burnout, and 28% experiencing symptoms of depression, compared to 17% in the general population. A 2021 study of North Carolina teachers found that 35% reported increased feelings of anxiety and depression in the wake of the pandemic (Na'Cole et al., 2024, p. 18). These findings are significant as emotional exhaustion is one of the strongest predictors of teachers leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001).

Crucially, these outcomes are not individual failures—they are structural conditions, upheld by a system that depends on overwork and emotional exhaustion. The myth of the martyr teacher renders these sacrifices invisible or even noble, reinforcing the idea that caring about students means accepting stress as a permanent job condition. But care should not require self-harm. The fact that teaching leads so predictably to stress, depression, and burnout is not inevitable—it is a reflection of how the profession has been shaped by patriarchal and neoliberal expectations of sacrifice.

If we are serious about strengthening public education, we must reject the notion that stress is simply part of educators' jobs. Reimagining teaching as a sustainable profession—where educators are compensated fairly, have control over their work, and are treated with dignity—is not just a matter of retention. It is a necessary act of resistance against the forces of privatization that exploit burnout for profit. Disrupting the martyr myth allows us to envision a future where teachers thrive, and public schools are places of care, not depletion.

## **Critical Posthumanism: A Framework for Disrupting the Martyr Teacher Myth**

The preceding analysis of teacher undercompensation and stress reveals that public education in the United States is structured around an expectation of sacrifice. The figure of the *martyr teacher*—selfless, self-sacrificing, and endlessly giving—functions not only as a cultural archetype but as a regulatory mechanism that justifies chronic underinvestment in teacher well-being. To disrupt this myth and expose the deeper forces that sustain it, this study draws on Rosi Braidotti's framework of critical posthumanism.

Critical posthumanism challenges the notion of the “human” as a stable, universal subject. Instead, it interrogates how the category of “the human” has historically been constructed around white, male, Western, able-bodied, and heteronormative norms—against which all other identities are defined as “less than” (Braidotti, 2019). Braidotti (2013) argues that this normative humanist subject operates as a regulatory standard that excludes those whose labor, embodiment, or social positioning falls outside this ideal.

This theoretical lens is especially powerful for understanding the figure of the teacher as a sacrificial subject. Teachers—particularly women, and especially women of color—are expected to perform emotional labor, absorb institutional shortcomings, and accept low wages, all in the name of care. From a posthumanist perspective, this expectation marks teaching as labor performed by bodies whose value is constructed as less-than-human: feminized and expendable. As Braidotti explains, the humanist subject “outlines a system of standards of recognizability—of Sameness—by which others can be assessed and regulated” (2019, p. 26). In this context, teachers are made recognizable only through their proximity to sacrifice.

Critical posthumanism offers three key commitments that guide this analysis:

- **Situated subjectivity.** Braidotti emphasizes that subjectivities are shaped within specific historical and spatial contexts. Understanding the martyr teacher myth requires attention to when and where expectations of sacrifice emerged and were normalized.
- **Power as both constraint (potestas) and potential (potentia).** This dual lens enables an analysis of the systems that limit teacher autonomy and well-being while illuminating points of resistance and possibility.

- **Affirmative critique.** Rather than stopping at deconstruction, Braidotti’s posthumanism calls for imagining new, sustainable ways of being. This study thus aims to reimagine teachers’ labor as something other than self-erasure, offering possibilities for collective transformation and care-based public education.

## METHODOLOGY: CARTOGRAPHY AS CRITICAL INQUIRY

To investigate how teaching became structured as sacrificial labor, I employed *cartography*, Braidotti’s (2019) posthumanist methodology designed to “track the production of knowledge and subjectivity” while revealing power both as limitation and potential (p. 33). Cartography is not about creating literal maps but tracing how ideas become normalized through intersections of space, time, and discourse.

In this project, cartography functions as a historically and politically grounded analysis of how the martyr teacher myth emerged and became sedimented in schools’ institutional life. Specifically, I used cartography to examine the spatial and temporal forces that shaped the feminization of teaching and rationalized sacrifice as a professional norm.

### Co-Reading: Gathering Data Through Posthumanist Interpretation

In line with post-foundational methodologies, I used *co-reading* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018) as a data collection method. Co-reading involves reading texts not as objective accounts but as meaning-making practices, analyzed through critical posthumanism’s ontological and epistemological commitments. In other words, texts are not just sources of evidence but sites where power circulates, revealing the cultural logics that define labor, value, and personhood.

I conducted two rounds of co-reading, guided by Braidotti’s emphasis on time (historical memory) and space (geopolitical location). First, I co-read feminist labor theorists including Nancy Fraser (2016), Silvia Federici (2012), Lise Vogel (1983), and Nancy Folbre (2001) to analyze how women’s labor—especially the work of caring for others—has historically been framed as a moral obligation rather than compensated labor. These texts revealed how sacrifice became embedded in the valuation (or devaluation) of feminized labor.

Second, I co-read education scholars such as Madeline Grumet (1988), Michael Apple (1986), Sari Knopp Biklen (1995), and Geraldine Clifford (2014) to analyze the feminization of the teaching profession. These texts provided insight into how the teaching workforce became disproportionately female and how institutional norms evolved to frame teachers’ professional value in terms of personal devotion, not expertise or economic worth.

Findings from each round of co-reading were recorded in a *co-reading dictionary*—a tool that indexed recurring themes, moments, and conceptual overlaps across time and space.

### Mapping: Tracing Convergences Across Time and Space

Data analysis involved mapping convergences across the historical and spatial dimensions surfaced through co-reading. This involved layering insights from the two text sets to examine how changing narratives about gender, labor, and care converged with the evolving structure of schools as workplaces. By treating history and geography as interlocking axes, I identified key moments when feminized labor, specifically teaching, was redefined through the language of sacrifice.

For example, the emergence of mass public schooling during the Progressive Era coincided with the professionalization of teaching and the reinforcement of women’s caregiving roles. These convergences created fertile ground for normalizing the martyr teacher myth—one that still governs contemporary expectations for how teachers should act, feel, and endure.

This analytical process reflects the spirit of Braidotti’s cartography: it resists rigid, linear methodologies in favor of open-ended, exploratory inquiry. By mapping how sacrifice became synonymous with teaching, I aim to historicize this harmful expectation and to disrupt it and propose alternate visions of what teacher labor could be.

## Findings: The Origins of the Martyr Teacher Myth

This section presents the findings of this study, tracing how the martyr teacher myth became embedded in the cultural and institutional fabric of American public education. By mapping convergences across historical and spatial dimensions using the method of cartography, this analysis reveals how the notion of teachers' labor as sacrificial emerged from broader systems of gender, labor, and power. Three core logics emerged from this mapping:

- Working to the point of self-sacrifice is highly virtuous.
- Teachers are responsible for solving systemic problems through personal sacrifice.
- Teachers must sacrifice for students, schools, and society to prosper.

These logics, deeply rooted in cultural assumptions about gender and labor, continue to shape the expectations placed on educators today. The following sections detail their historical and spatial evolution and the power dynamics that solidified them.

### The Historical Dimension: How “Women’s Work” Became Sacrifice

The martyr teacher myth is not a recent development but emerged alongside America's shift from agrarian life to industrial capitalism in the 19th century. In pre-industrial households, labor was largely collective and interdependent—women, men, and children all contributed to sustaining the home and community (Vogel, 1983). However, with the rise of industrial capitalism came a sharp division between “productive labor”—performed in the market for wages—and “reproductive labor”—performed at home and rendered economically invisible (Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2012).

This divide gave rise to the “separate spheres” ideology, a gendered framework that placed men in the public realm of work and politics and women in the private sphere of care and morality (Folbre, 2001; Fraser, 2016). Reproductive labor—childrearing, caregiving, homemaking—was recast as natural, selfless, and unskilled. It was no longer seen as labor requiring compensation, but as a moral obligation fulfilled out of love. As Fraser (2016) explains, this cultural logic demanded that women provide emotional refuge from the cruelty of capitalism, becoming a “haven in a heartless world” (p. 108).

Within this framework, care work bore a dual burden: it was materially devalued and simultaneously weaponized as a moral solution to systemic crises. Women were expected to tend to the wounds of capitalism without the power to prevent them and without adequate compensation for the care they provided.

This asymmetrical burden laid the groundwork for two of the most enduring elements of the martyr teacher myth: first, that teachers (mostly women) should be personally responsible for solving systemic problems through individual sacrifice; and second, that such labor is inherently virtuous and therefore does not require fair compensation. Because care work was framed as natural, selfless, and morally pure, advocating for better pay or working conditions could be cast as a betrayal of that virtue. In this way, the separate spheres ideology did more than divide labor by gender—it entrenched a cultural and moral logic that not only justified but celebrated the systematic undercompensation of labor now central to the teaching profession. It also scapegoated the harms of an inequitable social and economic order by making individual women personally responsible for resolving its fallout.

This cultural logic persists today. Teachers are routinely celebrated for their selflessness, even as they are underpaid, overworked, and expected to provide services far beyond the scope of their job descriptions. The perception that teaching is “a calling” rather than a profession is not simply a romantic ideal—it is a disciplinary mechanism that justifies chronic underinvestment in the teaching workforce.

As we will see in the next section, these ideas were not only cultural. They became materially institutionalized as public education expanded, codifying the logics of sacrifice and undercompensation into the profession.

## The Spatial Dimension: How Public Education Institutionalized Sacrificial Labor

America's transition to industrial capitalism not only reshaped ideas about labor but also transformed the material structure of the nation's education system in ways that institutionalized the martyr teacher myth. Before the 19th century and the establishment of a formal public school system, teaching was a male-dominated profession focused mainly on the education of elite white boys. Women were largely excluded from serving as educators through legal and cultural restrictions (Biklen, 1995; Grumet, 1988; Clifford, 2014). However, as men increasingly left the classroom for better-paying jobs in industry, a labor vacuum emerged in the newly emerging public education system.

Social reformers like Horace Mann envisioned public schooling as a means to instill values of order, discipline, and productivity in the working-class and immigrant populations needed by the capitalist economy (Apple, 1986; Grumet, 1988). The state needed a large, affordable, and compliant workforce to staff this system, and women fit that description.

Catherine Beecher, a prominent advocate for women's education and a contemporary of Mann, seized this opportunity to argue that women's domestic roles uniquely qualified them to become public school teachers. Drawing on the ideology of separate spheres, Beecher claimed that women's natural self-sacrifice, moral purity, and experience raising children made them ideal educators. She reasoned that because women were already expected to serve their families without pay, they could extend this ethic of care to the nation's children in schools, without expecting much in return (Beecher, 1841).

Beecher's logic reframed women's reproductive labor as a national resource. She argued that women's moral character suited them to care for students and made them uniquely responsible for cultivating a virtuous citizenry. In her view, the solution to widespread poverty, inequality, and moral decline was not structural reform but the selfless love of virtuous women.

This ideological maneuver had material consequences. Women entered the profession en masse, but not as professional workers with rights and resources. Instead, they were welcomed as moral and submissive guardians—"plentiful, cheap, and eager" (Maher & Tetreault, 2000, p. 199)—tasked with nurturing society while accepting low wages, limited authority, and expanding workloads.

As a result, the structure of public education evolved to depend on women's undervalued labor. Schools were built on the assumption that teachers would work long hours, provide emotional support, manage behavioral issues, absorb policy failures, and contribute to student well-being—all without sufficient compensation or systemic support. The feminization of teaching reduced costs for states and districts and helped codify sacrificial labor as the normative expectation for educators (Acker, 1995; Apple, 1986).

In sum, the spatial expansion of public education during the industrial era solidified the martyr teacher myth by embedding gendered expectations of sacrifice into the everyday conditions of teachers' work. The resulting system relies on underpaying educators while also overloading them, expecting them to fill the gaps left by systemic inequality through uncompensated time, care, and labor. These patterns persist in today's teacher shortage, which cannot be understood in isolation from the historical forces that made sacrificial labor the profession's foundation.

### DISCUSSION: WE NEED NEW STORIES FOR OUR OLD PROBLEMS

This paper argues that the martyr teacher myth evolved through the complex intersection of America's transition to capitalism, shifting narratives about the gendered nature of labor, and the feminization of the education workforce. Shaped by patriarchal and capitalist logics, this evolution produced a set of cultural expectations that framed teaching as inherently sacrificial work. Rooted in Victorian-era ideals of white middle-class womanhood and morality, the martyr myth became embedded in the education system, which continues to govern how teachers' labor is understood and valued.

The significance of these findings is both structural and urgent. Amid a deepening teacher shortage, policymakers have largely failed to address the root causes—burnout, unsustainable workloads, low pay—while privatization advocates use the crisis to promote school vouchers and market-based reforms. This paper contends that the shortage

is not a sudden or isolated phenomenon. Instead, it is the predictable result of an extractive labor model shaped by the contradictions of patriarchy and capitalism (Fraser, 2016). At the same time, this analysis reveals that labor ideologies are historically constructed and therefore malleable (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). If ideas shaped this crisis, new ideas—new narratives—can help resolve it.

## Reimagining Teachers' Labor Through the Politics of Care

The findings suggest that the teacher shortage cannot be addressed without reckoning with the historical construction of teaching as sacrificial labor. Expectations of self-sacrifice—originating in gendered divisions of labor and institutionalized through public education—have justified decades of poor compensation, excessive workloads, and deteriorating working conditions. Teachers have been positioned not only as the solution to systemic inequities but also as the scapegoats when those systems fail.

Burnout, high attrition, and overwhelming responsibilities are not anomalies. They are the material outcomes of a cultural narrative that treats teaching as a moral calling rather than a profession. Within this framework, overwork is reframed as virtue, and the real costs of teaching—unpaid labor, inadequate pay, emotional exhaustion, declining well-being—are rendered invisible. This narrative sustains a status quo where it is not systems but individuals who are held accountable for managing inequality.

The *politics of care* offers a powerful counter-narrative. As Chatzidakis et al. (2020) argue, a politics of care is grounded in collective responsibility, mutual dependence, and the ethical imperative to support those who sustain our communities. Applied to education, it challenges the cultural devaluation of care work and insists that teachers' labor must be compensated, protected, and respected. This means recognizing teaching not as a selfless sacrifice, but as skilled, essential labor deserving of structural support.

A care-centered approach would require schools to be restructured with teacher well-being at the center. This includes reducing workloads, raising wages, hiring more staff, minimizing bureaucratic demands, expanding access to mental health services, and ensuring autonomy in the classroom. These are not perks or performance rewards but baseline conditions for a sustainable profession.

In addition, embracing the politics of care offers a path for educators to unite with students, families, and communities around demands for public investment. As Premilla Nadasen (2023) illustrates, care-based movements can advance systemic change precisely because they center human dignity, not institutional efficiency. Reframing teacher labor through care, rather than sacrifice, creates the cultural foundation necessary to resist privatization and strengthen public education.

Ultimately, the martyr teacher myth cannot solve the teacher shortage—it created it. What is needed now is a new story in which teachers are not heroic exceptions but valued professionals working within systems designed to support them and the students they serve.

## CONCLUSION: RECONCEPTUALIZING TEACHERS' LABOR TO DEFEND PUBLIC EDUCATION

This paper has traced the historical and spatial evolution of the martyr teacher myth and its lasting impact on how teachers' labor is understood, exploited, and undervalued. It has shown how narratives of self-sacrifice, shaped by the gendered logics of capitalism and patriarchy, enabled an entire education system to be built on underpaid, overworked, and emotionally exhausted labor. From the ideology of separate spheres to the institutional feminization of the profession, the myth that teaching is an act of devotion rather than skilled labor has justified the chronic neglect of teachers' pay, workloads, and working conditions.

Today, this legacy plays a central role in the national teacher shortage. As educators leave the profession in record numbers, the martyr myth continues to mask the real causes of attrition: burnout, low compensation, and impossible expectations. At the same time, proponents of privatization exploit these dynamics, promoting vouchers and “school choice” as solutions to problems they helped create. The martyr myth and the privatization agenda work hand in hand, perpetuating a cycle of disinvestment, teacher departure, and institutional decline.

But this outcome is not inevitable. As this paper has argued, we need new stories about teachers' labor—stories that reject sacrifice as a virtue and embrace care as a shared social responsibility. A politics of care offers one such story. It invites us to reimagine schools as sites of support and sustainability, where teachers' contributions are honored with investment, not just appreciation. Reframing the teacher shortage as the outcome of exploitative labor systems, rather than individual failure, opens the door to systemic solutions rooted in equity and solidarity.

The implications of this reconceptualization are clear. It calls on policymakers to prioritize teacher working conditions and compensation. It challenges communities to resist privatization and austerity. It invites educators and their allies to organize around care rather than self-denial. Most importantly, it insists that public education cannot be saved by individual heroics—it must be supported by just, collective systems.

The stakes are high, but so are the possibilities. By telling new stories rooted in care, mutual respect, and democratic commitment, we can begin to dismantle the martyr teacher myth and build the future that public education deserves. This is how we move from sacrifice to shortage—and ultimately, how we defend public education by reconceptualizing teachers' labor.

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