The militarisation of schools in Brazil

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The election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil in 2018 led not only to a process of deregulating the economy, but it also brought with it a new educational agenda for the country.

Despite already existing in different ways before his election, the standard bearers of what is known as the "Schools without Political Parties" movement, in favour of the militarisation of schools, gained strength and national political coordination when Bolsonaro came to power.

The "Schools without Political Parties" movement aims to counter what was said to be "political, ideological and religious indoctrination", supposedly practised in educational institutions by Brazilian teachers.

Firmly rooted in a vision that denies history1, this movement focuses on accusing and persecuting members of the teaching profession, accusing them of being communists, preachers of atheism and what they agreed to call "gender ideology", a term that was created by neoconservatives who try, no matter the cost, to ban any type of debate on gender studies and related issues such as feminism.

The movement suffered a serious setback in August 2020, when the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled that a law banning schools from discussing issues related to gender and sexuality in the classroom was unconstitutional.

This legal victory for Brazilian education created important jurisprudence in the largest legal court in Brazil, dissuading others from presenting similar legislative bills.

Following this defeat, the main priority for Bolsonaro's education program was to focus on militarising schools.

Background and current situation

The project, which we are calling the "militarisation of schools", is not a reference to the military education institutions which essentially provide education to the sons and daughters of the armed forces.

The process of militarisation in schools to which we are referring is a government effort to transfer the administrative and pedagogical management of Brazil's 180,000 public, civilian schools to the armed forces.

As from his first day in office, through the Ministry of Education, Bolsonaro created the Sub-secretariat for Promoting Civilian-Military Schools, the director of which was a lieutenant colonel for the Brazilian army.

The process to militarise Brazilian schools, which is already underway in many states and municipalities that have taken the initiative to do so, has regained momentum with this political signal, and the very term "civilian-military schools" is now being used in many Brazilian cities following initiatives to militarise education.

In July 2019, the Ministry of Education launched the "National Commitment to Basic Education", with the aim of, amongst other priorities for basic education in Brazil, establishing 180 civilian-military schools in every state of the Brazilian Federation by 2023.

Following the Brazilian education sector's opposition to it, in September 2019, the government, through the General Secretariat of the Presidency, created the National Programme for Civilian-Military schools (PECIM) which subnational, federated entities could volunteer to join.

The financial support given to states and municipalities2, through the Ministry of Defence, and the lack of public resources for education faced by states and municipalities, meant that fifteen of the Federation's states joined the program.

In 2020, 54 schools in 23 of the 27 states of the Federation became part of the pilot project.

Society’s support for the pilot project is even increasing in the private education sector in Brazil, with the creation of private military schools.

Run by former members of the police force, reserve officers of the Brazilian army, and even civilian businesspeople, luring families in by stating there is a need for more “discipline” in educational processes, private teaching institutions with military discipline are proliferating in different Brazilian states.

Violation of national legislation and educational development

In the country of (famous Brazilian educator) Paulo Freire, the subversion of education, through the military appropriation of teaching, is happening at an alarming rate, ignoring the very legal order that regulates Brazil’s education system.

The fundamental principles of the Brazilian Constitution, which advocate for access to and continued enrolment in schools on an equal footing, have been blatantly ignored by these militarised institutions.

The spread of a militarised education system has also led to problematic students being expelled because they have not adjusted to the rules imposed.

Furthermore, this has become an obstacle to the principle of equality in learning, teaching, researching and disseminating critical thinking, the arts and knowledge.

The rigid and hierarchical rules of the militarism imposed on schools make this impossible. Bans on students presenting topics that are not to the military’s liking have also been denounced. This is an attack on the country’s Constitution which guarantees a multiplicity of ideas in school environments.

The principle of free schooling, guaranteed by the Constitution, is also under threat given that many militarised schools charge enrolment fees, “voluntary” monthly fees and because uniforms tend to be more expensive than in public education.

The principle of valuing teachers, based on a requirement that they should be adequately trained and remunerated, and hired through public competitions, has been systematically violated on the one hand, with the arrival of military teaching staff to teach some subjects, and on the other hand, with the hiring of military personnel for school management positions.

This also ends up affecting the principle of democratic management guaranteed under the Constitution.

As regards ensuring quality education, much has been said about the results achieved by these institutions which often performed better in the standardised assessments used in Brazil.

These improvements are largely due to the greater amount of resources the schools have at their disposal, as well as due to the military education centres’ selection process, which rejects students who deviate from the standard they wish to achieve.

In a militarised environment, there is no room for an education that frees people, that emancipates students as human beings.

Militarisation of schools means exclusion; an attack on the poor and democracy itself

According to sociologist and educator Miguel Arroyo’s analysis, the process of militarising schools is a project to criminalise working class children.

Arroyo highlights the general trend that this process has a greater impact on working class areas and on the suburbs of our cities.

In fact, the experiment to militarise Brazilian schools has almost been imposed as a priority in the suburbs where the poorest Afro-descendent children and the most vulnerable populations live.

Under the pretext of mitigating violence in schools, a problem that has a tragic impact on a society marked by social and economic inequality, the ideology of militarisation has managed to win support from society, particularly in this segment of the population.

The idea that militarised schools will provide more security to their children, something that is shared by some families living in the outermost suburbs, is a reflection of a state policy that creates fear and is threatening.

The severity of the experiment to militarise schools is even greater when we realise that this policy will create more exclusion and prejudices in the school environment.

The shortcomings regarding these matters in the civilian school environment that already existed will become drastically worse in the context of militarised educational institutions.

The tendency to standardise students' behaviour and identity in an environment like that of schools, will create more prejudices and exclusion against everyone who is "different".

This will in turn affect our poorest students, as well as women, Afro-descendants, foreigners, homosexuals and transexuals.

The Brazilian education sector's struggle can foresee many battles against this system which is being devastatingly and tragically imposed on the country following Bolsonaro's election, as he is the person who is mainly responsible for disseminating this education model.

Furthermore, we will have to confront an ideology that has been disseminated and absorbed by some families who see this school model as a valid option for their children's education. In light of the many explicit violations against our legal order, it is inevitable that the debate will be taken to the highest courts of the country.

What is most important is that the struggle to defend public schools has now become a political struggle to defend our country's democracy. A democracy that, in Brazil, is being seriously undermined during these tragic times of Bolsonaro's government.

Footnotes

1 Those that defend this conservative and reactionary movement are attacking these professionals' academic freedom and, in an effort to rewrite Brazil's history, are starting to carry out the absolute revisionism of our own official histography, praising and defending the bloody civilian-military dictatorship that was installed in Brazil in 1964 and which lasted until the mid-1980s.

2 The Bolsonaro government's promise to establish 216 of these schools by the end of his term has meant that the (Brazillian) federal government has earmarked almost 152 000 Euro (one million Reals in Brazilian currency) to every unit that joins.

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