The cost of public-private partnerships in education

By Carolina Finette

In this story, I share my personal trajectory as a teacher experiencing public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the Brazil countryside and urge stakeholders to reflect on the problems involving such partnerships to education. In addition, I reflect on how such PPPs are a result of the lack of financing in education and on how important it is for stakeholders to advocate for enlarged budgets in the sector in the context of the Transforming Education Summit.

After the global pandemic, many challenges already faced by educators were deepened. The Transforming Education Summit provides us with
an opportunity to sustain pressure on member states on important matters in education. I would like to invite you toconsider my experience as an educator in Brazil as one of the many examples of why governments must commit to providing larger budgets for education.

In Brazil, it is common for parents to avoid placing their children in public schools, especially if they have the necessary financial means. We hear from elders that “education is not as it used to be in the good old days...”. The “good old days” is usually associated with the Brazilian Dictatorship Period (1964-1985) and the years before that, when mass media was forced to give favourable publicity to state services (such as education) to promote the authoritarian regime.

When the Democratic Period began, the state became responsible for providing free public education to all people and although universal access to education was a major gain in the newly established democracy, the expanded demand for education services was followed by budgetary constraints in the sector. In addition, the continuous pressure from international organisations for countries – mainly in the Global South - to adopt PPPs in order to improve educational results has also influenced Brazilian public education.

As a teacher, I was able to personally experience some of the effects of private agents in education. When the school where I was teaching announced a partnership with one of the main private institutes in Brazil, most teachers were quite excited about it - including me. We saw this as a possibility to bring fresh, modern perspectives to the school and to improve teaching-learning processes.

As time went by, it became clear that this was not necessarily the case. Because of the influence of this private foundation, teachers lost their pedagogical autonomy: we had to settle for pre-made class plans (provided by the institute), agree to extra hours of work filling in spreadsheets and reports with data on student performance – all justified as means to improve “learning”. The problem was that learning was never the focus of this “improvement”. Learning was confused with better results in assessments and indicators. All we would hear in pedagogical training sessions were actions we should take to diminish retention rates, reduce absences, age- series distortion and of course, improve our students’ scores in national (and international) assessments.

Suddenly, focusing on the teaching processes – the pedagogical needs and interests of students or how to make sure they become fully independent members of society – was forgotten. And teachers who dared to question this situation received hostile treatment

from management. Moreover, we were constantly put in competition with other schools or other teachers that performed better. We were regularly reminded of the need to act quickly and efficiently so that students don’t lose focus on the matters given priority.

I wonder if it would have been different if we had had more freedom to teach what students were interested in – and in need of – learning. At some points, I had students laughing at some of the activities I proposed in class (which were part of the pre-made class action plan) because they considered them too silly. And the worst part is, I agreed with them. But I did it anyway in order to fulfil the action plan. As a beginner teacher, I was scared I could lose my job if I didn’t do as I was told.

Now, I don’t want this story to discourage people from becoming educators. Instead, I want to use this platform to urge educators, stakeholders and society to advocate for free public education and to raise questions as to how and why non-state actors still educate over 350 million children worldwide. Moreover, I want us to consider how the enlargement of education finance could contribute to reversing this scenario and hold states accountable for education quality – instead of

handing education to the private sector.

As several studies show, better financing of education could provide education workers with fair salaries and incentivise more people to join - and stay - in the profession. It could allow workers to have only one job - instead of juggling two or three, as most teachers must do to achieve financial independence. It would allow educators to have time to examine their pedagogical approach, their students' needs and use their knowledge and creativity to improve their teaching. It would allow students to have good social support in schools. It would enable schools to be better equipped, safe and ready to welcome students and the community into what is supposed to be the exciting process of teaching and learning.

Most of all, expanded financing gives schools the freedom of choice. Nowadays, although there are no formal obligations for schools to join PPPs, the lack of resources makes PPPs extremely appealing. Foundations promote PPPs as an inexpensive (or "free of cost") solution to all school problems, facilitating education "quality" with the resources and skills the institution will provide them with.

But PPPs are never free of cost. They cost education workers their pedagogical autonomy and private institutions benefit from them in several ways: financially – through tax benefits, for example – and politically, by gaining space and power

in the public sphere. In addition, PPPs have not proven to have significant positive effects on large education systems, although further research is still needed. Therefore, states must enlarge financing in education to ensure schools can choose independently, focusing on pedagogy and workers' and students' well-being.

Schools, students and educators worldwide cannot, should not and will not pay this high price.

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