

Educational policies in times of pandemic: a view from Brazil¹

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Brazil is a very clear case of the commoditization of education. The groups that are controlled by investment funds, listed on the stock exchange, have profoundly modified the field, with their technological platforms and educational systems.

1. Paper presented at the Virtual Forum of the Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA), October 20, 2021.

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The expansion of private and mercantile schools (from 36.4 thousand schools in 2010 to 40.6 thousand in 2019, out of which 76% are for-profit) has increased the concentration of private organizations that seek to benefit financial corporations. But the purpose of education itself has also been reshaped. A very concrete example of this interference is the holding company called COGNA, which has one million students. Its stock market value reached four billion dollars in 2019. It has a subsidiary: Vasta - whose business is the sale of teaching systems and platforms, and which is quoted on NASDAQ.

Vasta is a corporation of educational systems (mainly textbooks and manuals), and teaching platforms, that



PORTAL: DYNAMO INTERNACIONAL

targets the private education sector in Brazil. The later represents 19% of all students in basic education, and 77% in higher education. Strategically, however, it is focusing on public education.

In Brazil, the first two cycles of basic education (early childhood education and elementary schools) are the responsibility of the 5,570 municipalities and states (secondary education, 15 to 17 years old). Thus, the commercialization of platforms and corporate learning systems can radically change the daily education of children and young people, from a municipal and state levels. Learning platforms are structured by algorithms that are not neutral; but on the contrary, they are performative and shape the profiles of their

users. In this way, learners are no longer conceived as subjects, but rather profiles susceptible to political manipulation. The Cambridge Analytica case show very clearly how algorithms operate .

Teaching platforms are, at the same time, work platforms. Since 2016, large educational corporations have expanded the offer of remote education: in 2016, 123 thousand students; in 2018, one million 900 thousand. But information and communication technologies have caused an extraordinary increase in the exploitation of teachers, with their administrative and pedagogical restructuring. In five years, the Kroton Corporation, now owned by the COGNA holding company, reduced the cost of the workforce from 56% of revenues to only

24%. This is a deep change in the intensification and extent of labor exploitation.

Another corporation, LAUREATE -also known in Mexico- uses robots to correct student work. Recently, in the context of the pandemic, it fired hundreds of teachers who were replaced by robotic technology in remote education programs. The "platformization" of work is a reality in education. A few months ago, COGNA formed a partnership with the telecommunications giant TIM to design courses for mobiles. The goal is to sell several lighter courses in which on-line classes will last only 10 minutes! But more importantly, the courses are defined by algorithms developed by the communication corporation. They are designed according to the type of user profile: undergraduate, graduate and extension courses, etc. It is very likely that the algorithms will end up defining the ideological and cultural profile of the students through the courses' contents.

These corporations are training the vast majority of elementary education teachers in Brazil: they have six hundred and thirty-three thousand teachers in training, 485, 000 of whom are in organizations under financial control and, for the most part, with shares in the stock market. Today, 75% of the private sector with remote education is linked to investment funds. This is also a very structural change: the vast majority of future teachers are trained by corporations.

In Brazil, the offensive of capital on education coincides with a shift into a war on culture. The government of Jair Bolsonaro is a very dangerous combination of cultural attacks with extreme neoliberalism. For instance, a parliamentary commission of inquiry concluded that Bolsonaro committed crimes against humanity in his response to the pandemic. Until November 2021, six hundred and five thousand people died by COVID 19, and many of these deaths could have been avoided if the government had not adopted negationist policies.

During the pandemic, out of the 70 million students in Brazil, 50% did not have adequate access to the Internet, nor were they able to study virtually due

to their precarious living conditions. Thus, many young people did not take the national exam to access higher education: in 2019, five million 700 thousand students took it; in 2020 and 2021 only about three million did. Among those who dropped out of the exam, African-descendants, indigenous people, and young people from the periphery stand out. There is a very structural segregation.

At the same time, out of the 2.2 million teachers in elementary education, close to fifty percent did not have a stable work contract, or for an indefinite period of time. Most were short-term contracts, and thousands were not renewed. Similarly in the private sector, thousands will lose their employment contracts, all of which is changing their labor conditions. It is fair to say there is a generalized burn-out, characterized by exhaustion, discouragement, labor suffering, and lack of recognition.

The government is following a very fierce policy of neo-fascist characteristics. The Minister of Education believes universities are institutions for the elites, while the Minister of Finance brags that equality can be taken for granted since even the son of a janitor can go to university. Meanwhile, the president says racial quotas for the "less intelligent students" reduce the quality of Brazilian education, due to their inferior human nature. Plus, he has been very hostile against scientific knowledge. Science is conceived to be a fiction at the service of cultural Marxism. The whole environment is very harsh and dangerous for academic freedom.

In conclusion, I think it is very important to rescue the political and educational concern of Paulo Freire. The extreme right, through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and their algorithms, stirred very reactionary attitudes that are still present in Brazilian society: racist, patriarchal, homophobic, elitist, and so on. Because of this, what is considered to be common sense has changed, which is one of the main problems between education and politics in Brazil. Freire talked about changing what he called the "intransitive consciousness", or a naive and fatalistic consciousness. Through



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dialogue with people in diverse cultural circles, and reflecting on the meaning of words, Freire developed the concept of critical, historical transitivity, to overcome reactionary common sense, which is what we need to challenge now.

In Brazil, in 2019, the youth took over the streets, like a tsunami. More than a million all over the country were mobilized. There were very important strikes in defense of life, against the reform of education in secondary education, and to face the counter-reform of the Constitution. Today, there is a very dangerous administrative counter-reform in the country.

The greatest challenge is an internationalization of the struggles in defense of public education, and a new construction of it. As the very important Brazilian sociologist, Florestan Fernandes, described it: a new starting point for the struggles of public education. Professors, teachers and students cannot defend public education alone in the present. New national and international coalitions are essential. The IDEA/SEPA Network is an inspiration and a historical necessity for teachers' struggles and the defense of public education.