



SCHOOL WITHOUT PARTY: FROM CONTROL TO DISPOSSESSION

ESCOLA SEM PARTIDO: DO CONTROLE À ESPOLIAÇÃO

ESCOLA SEM PARTIDO [ESCUELA SIN PARTIDO]: DEL CONTROL A LA DESPOSESIÓN

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Abstract

The Escola Sem Partido (ESP) movement, or School Without Party, was initially proposed in Brazil in 2004. Ten years later, with the emergence of conservative rallies and gatherings nationwide, it gained notoriety and strong support from members of Congress as well as from right-wing parties. Grounded on the belief that Brazilian schools probably harbour leftist indoctrination and claiming a non-partisan profile, in addition to sparking controversy over educational guidelines, the ESP has recently increased its ranks and several bills have been put forward in the Chamber of Deputies and in many state legislative assemblies. An analysis of these bills and of the central claims backed by ESP supporters reveals another side to the movement, as this paper shows. Factors including ESP's covert interests, partisan disputes, a link with authoritarian tendencies that call for curtailing teachers' work, as well as a connection with a broader project that aims to turn schools into a business enterprise via dispossession, raise serious questions and a general discussion regarding the movement's real interests and their implications for Brazil's educational system. Such a discussion is vital for establishing a more effective counterargument, based on informed knowledge, on leadership, and on the fight for a more autonomous and democratic school.

Keywords: Escola Sem Partido. Control. Education. Dispossession.

Resumo

A primeira proposta do Escola Sem Partido (ESP) foi elaborada em 2004. Dez anos depois, com a eclosão de mobilizações e movimentos conservadores pelo Brasil, ganhou repercussão e forte apoio de parlamentares e de partidos de direita. Alegando provável doutrinação esquerdista nas escolas, autoproclamando-se apartidário e polemizando temas relativos às diretrizes educacionais, o movimento ampliou suas frentes de ação, e projetos de lei do ESP foram apresentados na Câmara dos Deputados e em Assembleias Legislativas de vários estados do país. Uma análise desses projetos e das concepções defendidas por seus apoiadores, conforme evidenciamos neste texto, revela outras faces do movimento. Os interesses implícitos, a disputa partidária, o vínculo com tendências totalitárias que instigam o cerceamento do trabalho docente e a ligação com um projeto mais amplo que visa fazer da escola um grande negócio via espoliação, acende um alerta e suscita um amplo debate sobre os reais interesses do ESP e suas implicações à educação do país. Essa discussão é fundamental para a construção de um contraponto mais eficiente, baseado no esclarecimento, no protagonismo e na luta por uma escola mais autônoma e democrática.

Palavras-chave: Escola Sem Partido. Controle. Educação. Espoliação.

Resumen

El proyecto Escola Sem Partido (ESP), o Escuela Sin Partido, se propuso inicialmente en Brasil en 2004. Diez años después, con la eclosión de movilizaciones y movimientos conservadores en Brasil, ganó repercusión y fuerte apoyo de parlamentarios y de partidos de derecha. Alegando probable adoctrinamiento izquierdista en las escuelas, autoproclamándose apartidario y polemizando temas relativos a las directrices educativas, el movimiento amplió sus frentes de acción, y los proyectos de ley del ESP se presentaron en la Cámara de

los Diputados y en las Asambleas Legislativas de varios estados del país. Un análisis de esos proyectos y de las concepciones defendidas por sus partidarios, como evidenciamos en este texto, revela otras caras del movimiento. Los intereses implícitos, la disputa partidista, el vínculo con tendencias totalitarias que instigan la intimidación del trabajo docente y la relación con un proyecto más amplio que busca hacer de la escuela un gran negocio vía desposesión, enciende una alerta y suscita un amplio debate sobre los reales intereses del ESP y sus implicaciones a la educación del país. Esta discusión es fundamental para la construcción de un contrapunto más eficiente, basado en el esclarecimiento, en el protagonismo y en la lucha por una escuela más autónoma y democrática.

Palabras clave: Escuela Sin Partido. Control. Educación. Desposesión.

Introduction

The effectiveness of totalitarian regimes has been well described by dystopian novels from the first half of the twentieth century, such as Aldous Huxley's 1931 book *Brave New World* and George Orwell's 1949 book *1984*. According to Orwell (2009), imposing a particular form of thinking, social control, and extreme surveillance would gradually be perfected to the point of encouraging people to volunteer to spy on others. Before Orwell, Huxley (1979) had warned that State-sponsored manipulation through effective scientific methods would lead to a stage in which people would love their own servitude. The idea of exploiting labour via a restriction of liberties in various professional domains is also very well depicted in these novels.

However, the future foreseen in these books is not too distant, since much of what Orwell had in mind can be seen in extremist movements currently emerging in many parts of the world. The recourse to tighter forms of control – which benefit from State-owned organisational structures and technological resources – gradually takes over several aspects of daily life. Hence, the educational system becomes a key element for a greedy set of agents that seek, first and foremost, to impose a single way of thinking and of teaching and learning. It is in such a scenario that movements like the Escola Sem Partido (ESP) [School Without Party], first proposed in Brazil in 2004, are formed. Support for the cause was initially low, with many teachers underestimating it in view of the absurdity and backwardness of many of the issues raised.

Over the years, especially with the growth of conservative rallies and gatherings, the ESP found support in neoliberal agendas and, what had seemed unlikely ten years before, gained ground in the legal arena with the presentation of the first related bill to the Chamber of Deputies. But

this is not the major course of action taken by the movement's proponents and supporters. Its apparent isonomy (apparent since its non-partisanship is only terminological) has begun to spark controversy over Brazil's educational guidelines and much of what is backed by its supporters ultimately draws people's attention away from the real problems facing education. Moreover, the shelving of ESP bills in several states and in the Chamber of Deputies (on 11 December 2018) has paved the way for new proposals with even more contentious issues; an example is bill no. 246/2019, proposed on the Chamber's first session in 2019 (Brasil, 2019).

Repeated attacks on teachers through social media, the press, and statements by members of Congress and ESP supporters also reveal an aspect that cannot be underestimated: the teacher has become the person to blame, given that the formative process he/she participates in is firmly grounded on autonomy and freedom of thought, in spite of all the institutional constraints on his/her professional practice. This means that the ESP – unlike claims made by its proponents – gradually turns into a movement that aims to frontally attack people's liberties and undermine pedagogical autonomy even further.

However, such an attack is also politically motivated. Both the school and the educational system become arenas for disputing parties which may bring even more turmoil to educational policies, hence drawing people's attention away from certain initiatives that seek to reduce the school's social role and turn it into a profitable business enterprise. These factors, together with incentives for the surveillance and intimidation of teachers and the spread of backward and anachronistic ideas about education, ultimately stimulate an even more persuasive, dual, and narrow formative environment.

Accounts of censorship and persecution of teachers, recently reported all over the country, expose the ESP's link with totalitarian tendencies and evoke the control strategies described by Orwell (2009). To many, comparing the movement with dystopian narratives sounds ludicrous. However, as expressed by the famous American comedian and writer Mark Twain: "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities: Truth isn't". The ESP is precisely this: senseless, uncanny, and loaded with contradictions. It is unable to hide its indifference to social liberties. However, the controversies raised are often intentional since they help to conceal ulterior interests.

This paper addresses such issues and discusses the ESP's link with a broader scheme of political power that uses control and surveillance to bring tension to teachers' work, to undermine critical thinking, and to mask a strategy that strives to turn education into big business via dispossession. Analysing these issues and the way they may trigger more extensive dismantling of educational policies is crucial to establish a more effective counterargument, based on dialogue, on leadership, and on the fight for pedagogical autonomy and for the school we want.

The story of a project

The story of a project like the ESP is not a random one or the result of an isolated idea. Therefore, it is important to understand the social context in which it emerged and the circumstances that influenced its formulation and resonance with broader agendas. The ESP was first proposed in 2004 by lawyer Miguel Nagib (ESP, [2018?]), but it was only ten years later that Nagib's manifesto gave rise to a series of parliamentary bills, boosted by ample support from members of Congress and business executives. The first of these bills, no. 7,180/2014, was presented to the Chamber of Deputies on 24 February 2014 by deputy Erirelton Santana, then a member of PSC-Bahia.

The ESP's website includes bills' preliminary drafts available for download and for replication at municipal, state, and federal levels (ESP, [2018?]). The project was presented in legislative houses of seven states (Rio de Janeiro, Goiás, São Paulo, Espírito Santo, Ceará, Rio Grande do Sul, and Alagoas) and of the Federal District, as well as in ten municipal chambers (São Paulo in São Paulo state, Rio de Janeiro in Rio de Janeiro state, Curitiba, Santa Cruz do Monte Castelo, Toledo, and Foz do Iguaçu in Paraná state, Palmas in Tocantins state, Joinville in Santa Catarina state, Vitória da Conquista in Bahia state, and Cachoeira do Itapemirim in Espírito Santo state).

Alagoas was the first state to pass a bill inspired on the ESP; the ensuing law, known as "Free School", awaits a decision by Brazil's Supreme Federal Court (STF) after having been challenged via a Direct Action of Unconstitutionality (ADI). Other states, in turn, have taken a stance against the ESP. One example is Paraíba, which passed bill no. 2,013/2018 on 4 December 2018; the latter ensures freedom of expression,

of thought, and of opinion on all schools in the state, both public and private. In the Chamber of Deputies, the anti-ESP bill known as “School Without Gag” (no. 502/2019) was presented by deputy Talíria Petrone (PSOL-Rio de Janeiro) on 6 February 2019.

Prior to that, the ESP bill had been shelved by a Chamber committee on 11 December 2018. Nevertheless, hasty commemorations on the part of those opposed to the movement failed to consider the real possibility of its unshelving and the fact that the proposal found an even more favourable political environment in Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency. Less than two months after this episode, yet another bill, with even more contentious issues (BRASIL, 2019), was presented by deputy Bia Kicis (PSL-Federal District). This took place on 4 February, the Chamber’s first session in 2019.

In addition to containing the ESP’s former version, the new bill includes two articles (7 and 8) that indicate an attempt to regulate the activities of student associations and to ensure students’ right to record classes. In the first case, there is a clear effort to intervene in the way students organise themselves and to hinder their mobilisations. In the second, there is an evident move towards intimidating teachers via technological resources, as well as towards encouraging surveillance and censorship of teachers’ work and restricting freedom of teaching, all of which violate constitutional rights.

In general, the main argument in favour of ESP bills is that Brazilian schools are fraught with leftist indoctrination. According to bill no. 246/2019, effective measures need to be taken to prevent “the practice of political and ideological indoctrination in schools, as well as the usurpation of parents’ right to having their children receive a moral education in line with their own convictions” (Brasil, 2019, my translation). Thus, this paper will shed light on the ESP’s contradictions and on the way its proponents offer an isolated and decontextualised interpretation of an article of the American Convention on Human Rights. The concern with what is termed “ideological indoctrination” led deputy Rogério Marinho (PSDB-Rio Grande do Norte) to present bill no. 1,411/2015, which typifies the crime of ideological harassment in schools. The bill was later withdrawn by Marinho himself. Its aim, according to him, “was achieved by sparking a debate and fighting indoctrinators who insist in harassing Brazilian children and uneducating them every day” (Brasil, 2017, my translation).

Despite the considerable efforts made around these bills, the story of the ESP is not over on the legal front – quite the contrary. The call for intimidating teachers has turned into an open campaign on the part of ESP supporters, among them members of Congress. An emblematic case was that of deputy Ana Caroline Campognolo (PSL-Santa Catarina), who posted a video on social media calling students to film and denounce their teachers (Deputadad..., 2018). The state's Public Prosecutor's Office ordered the post to be deleted, following which Campognolo appealed to the state Justice Department and obtained an injunction on 24 January 2019 which enabled her to retain the video online. However, the injunction was overruled by the STF on 8 February 2019.

It seems that, even though the ESP violates constitutional principles such as freedom of expression of intellectual activities and the right to pluralism of ideas, the legal front is unable to contain such a wave of censorship. By inducing students and their relatives to spy on and intimidate teachers, the movement shows its vile nature and its non-commitment to pedagogical and constitutional cornerstones. Moreover, by claiming the existence of leftist indoctrination in schools, it dichotomises the learning environment, hence revealing its partisan motivation, its attempt to eliminate divergent opinions, and a strongly outdated notion of the teaching and learning process, one that views students as being susceptible to manipulation. Its obsession with vigilance and control thus evokes a specific way of understanding the teaching and learning process.

Persecution, control and a backward view of the teaching and learning process

Whenever obedience is consented and surveillance is voluntarily carried out, it means that control and curtailment have reached an advanced level of efficiency. But in which situations is that possible? Under which political and institutional regime are forms of control allowed to reach such efficiency? What happens to the formative process in circumstances that limit people's autonomy and the freedom to think and to disagree?

By encouraging students to monitor classes and teachers' routines, the ESP is in fact distancing the formative process from authenticity. Incentives to intimidate reveal the movement's totalitarian undertones, as well as a backward notion of the teaching and learning process on the

part of its proponents. How can one assess such a process while teachers are being filmed? The use of technologies to monitor classes brings to the fore a daunting prospect not only to teaching practice but also to students themselves, since the latter, instead of focusing their attention on classroom interaction and interpretation, concentrate on surveillance.

In addition to transforming and reducing learning, this sentinel-like surveillance on the part of students jeopardises critical thinking, narrows worldviews, and dichotomises knowledge. The latter is thus reduced to two separate parts: one which students regard as the correct one, while the other must be monitored, stopped, and reported. Beyond such dualism, the ESP underestimates students by depicting them as indoctrinable and vulnerable, on the one hand, and by treating teachers as simple transmitters of knowledge, on the other. The concept of teaching grounded on formal logic, which is endorsed by the movement, implicitly strives to limit the scope of education to the technicist model; this model is aimed primarily at students whose parents are workers, viewed as individuals who must obey.

If, on the one hand, teachers are reduced to transmitters of knowledge, on the other they are overestimated as individuals capable of manipulating students and imposing their own knowledge. Therefore, the ESP stigmatises teachers as indoctrinators and reduces students to vulnerable individuals and/or mere receivers of knowledge. There is no concern for students' cognitive filters or their autonomy in thinking and producing knowledge via interactive processes, nor even for the diversity which makes up the teaching community. This shows the lack of knowledge and/or disregard for learning theories on the part of ESP's proponents and supporters.

Mediation plays a crucial role in school-based education. According to Cavalcanti (1998, p. 12), the construction and expansion of bodies of knowledge, "the confrontation between different types of knowledge, the development of cognitive abilities of abstract thinking", are processes "that may be potentialised through pedagogical intervention" (my translation). School knowledge is constructed in the very confrontation between daily and scientific concepts (Cavalcanti, 1998). That is why teaching, in bringing together these various types of knowledge, makes the teacher's mediation indispensable. The corollary of such a notion, according to Vygotsky (1984), is that mediated learning requires organisation and

interactive processes. Unlike in formal logic, which presupposes the acquisition of knowledge as an automatic process, from a sociocultural perspective the student constructs his/her own ideas based on what was learnt and on interactions with classmates.

Such a standpoint indicates the importance of collective and collaborative activities in the classroom. Hence, instead of encouraging restrictive and punitive measures in such an environment, it is much more sensible and productive to encourage mutual collaboration and support among students (Kropotkin, 2014). Promoting favourable learning conditions and increasing spaces for interaction and socialisation in pedagogical practices may boost students' intellectual advancement and cognitive development. By relating knowledge acquired in daily life with that learnt in school, students gradually develop their awareness of the world, of historical processes, and of reality, with its complexity and contradictions. A more contextual form of teaching, based on collective research and on the correlation between concepts taught by the teacher and those experienced on a daily basis, offers a vital contribution to learning, as Boneta i Carrera (2017) contends in an interesting work on the pedagogical experiences of renowned Catalan educator Artur Martorell. Through mediation it is also vital to help students nurture a desire to learn and to understand life phenomena. Imagination has, in this sense, an important function in the construction of scientific thinking (Kropotkin, 2014). It is amid such a process, thus, that students construct their own way of thinking about and acting in the world.

In summary, the fact that a teacher may have a solid political view does not mean that students will endorse it. It may be normal for a teacher to be a diligent reader of conservative authors, but it is also possible that certain students may hold radically opposing views. This is not a problem. Despite their central role in the teaching and learning process, teachers do not yield as much power as is claimed by the ESP. Regardless of leftist, rightist, centrist or autonomist political preferences – or any other, for that matter –, teachers' interests should focus on fully preparing students to think for themselves, to build their autonomy, and to develop a worldview that will enable them to challenge, agree with or oppose their teachers.

The false premise of neutrality

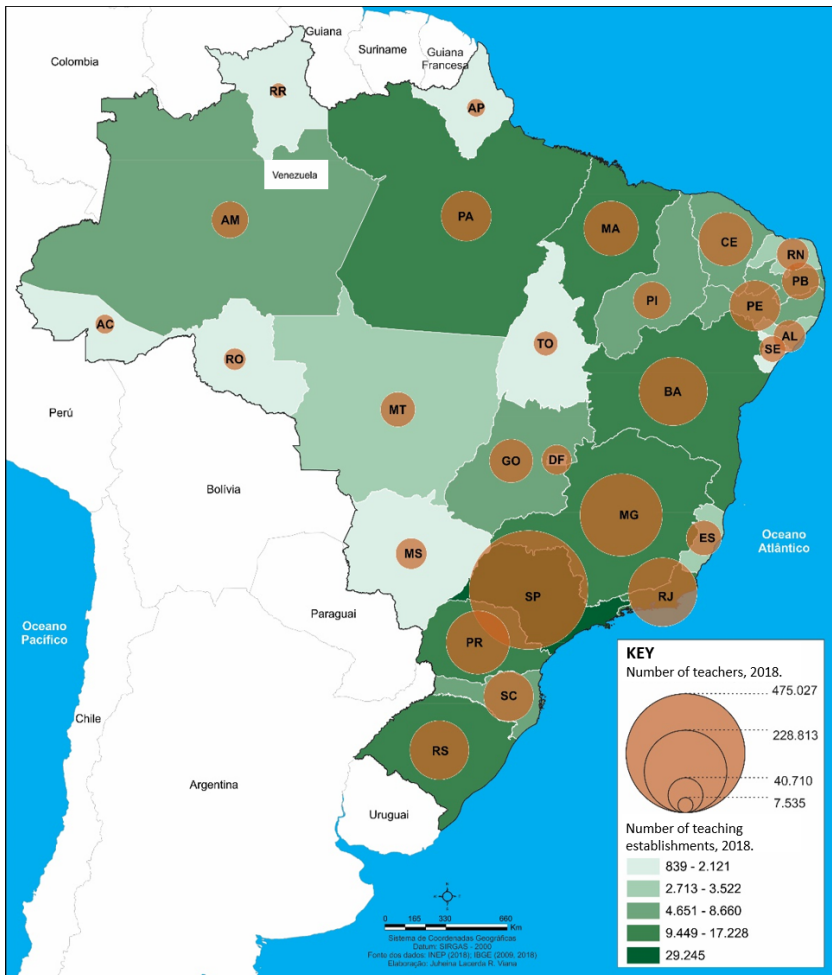
Neutrality and non-partisanship are two of the ESP's repeatedly evoked premises. How is this possible, however, if the ESP itself is backed and sponsored by parties like PSL, PSC, and DEM? The conservative agenda contended by the movement is by no means new, and there is little doubt about what kind of school and education its proponents endorse. Fostering a particular agenda is a social right, but, when persecution is involved, then totalitarianism ensues.

Moreover, by subscribing to the belief that Brazilian schools have been taken over by Marxism and by an army of "leftist indoctrinators", the ESP helps to form a questionable view of teachers' work and of the reality of schools nationwide. These stereotypes often stem from people quite unfamiliar with the school environment. On the eve of taking office, president Bolsonaro himself stated that "the Marxist garbage has taken over schools" (UOL, 2018, my translation), hence showing a complete lack of knowledge both of Karl Marx and of Brazilian schools. As pointed out in a previous paper, if Marx's body of works is presented in a rather cursory way in Political Economy courses, how about in schools? (Castilho, 2019). Books 1, 2, and 3 of *The Capital*, published in Brazil by Editora Boitempo in 2011, 2014, and 2017, respectively, have 2,638 pages in total. Book 4, published by Editora Difel, is divided into three volumes that total 1,616 pages. Together, the four books comprise 4,254 pages. Considering how difficult it is to find a teacher who has actually read *The Capital* in its entirety (let it be noted that the book is not a summary of Marxism), it is easy to perceive the extent of the president's exaggerated claim.

As regards the belief that an army of leftist indoctrinators is currently in charge of Brazilian schools, some statistics are in order. As shown in Figure 1, Brazil has 181,939 schools of basic education, of which 60.6% are managed at municipal level, 16.7% at state level, 0.4% at federal level, and 22.3% are private. A total of 2.2 million teachers work in these schools, 60.9% of which work at elementary level, according to the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (Inep, 2019). As highlighted by Ratier (2016), data concerning the affiliation of basic education teachers to political parties so far do not confirm the ESP's claim. Ratier adds that surveys carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show that only 10% of teachers claim to

be affiliated to political parties. Moreover, recent data made available by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) regarding political affiliation among the Brazilian population shows that the MDB party has the highest number of affiliations, with 10.3% of the national total. Together with PSDB they make up 24.5% of affiliations (Ratier, 2016).

Figure 1 - Number of educational establishments and teachers in basic education in Brazil (2018)



The fact that the number of affiliations to more conservative parties is superior to those of left-wing parties is unsurprising, as is the fact that these data attest to Brazilian schools' much more conservative profile. At the same time, one cannot argue that there is a considerable diversity of political views among teachers working in educational networks of any municipality or region in the country. Far from constituting a problem, this diversity indicates that schools do not exist separately from society at large. Since it is not insular, the school setting translates diversity, as well as problems and contradictions of the real world. As stated in a previous paper, training that leads to militancy (and vice versa) normally takes place within rallies and social movements, not necessarily in a classroom (Castilho, 2018). Students' contact with a more critical and revolutionary literature usually occurs in militant environments and networks, in interactions with fellow protesters, in short duration courses, meetings, assemblies, social organisations, etc.

This is indicative of the fact that political education transcends the classroom. Even if a teacher or student is not affiliated to a political party and disagrees with principles endorsed by one, such a stance is still political. That is why the ESP's partisan neutrality is a fallacy. In addition to its connections with conservative parties, the movement leaves no doubt as to its worldview and to its complete intolerance for critical and autonomous thinking. As a result, it has become known as "School with Gag" or "School of a Single Thought".

Furthermore, the ESP's ideologues often resort to an article in the American Convention on Human Rights to justify constraints on certain issues. Article 12 of the Convention thus states: "parents [...] are entitled to have their children or students receive the religious and moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions". This article, observes Ximenes (2016, p. 55, my translation), "cannot be read in a decontextualised and isolated manner as the ESP has done, but as part of the right to education in a broad sense". Parents' right as regards informal education (established in the family environment and throughout life) and non-formal education (concerning initiatives effected outside educational systems) "is not incompatible with the treatment of moral, political, and sexual issues within formal education".

Ximenes (2016, p. 55, my translation) further states that the inclusion of such topics in school courses "is part of students' right to

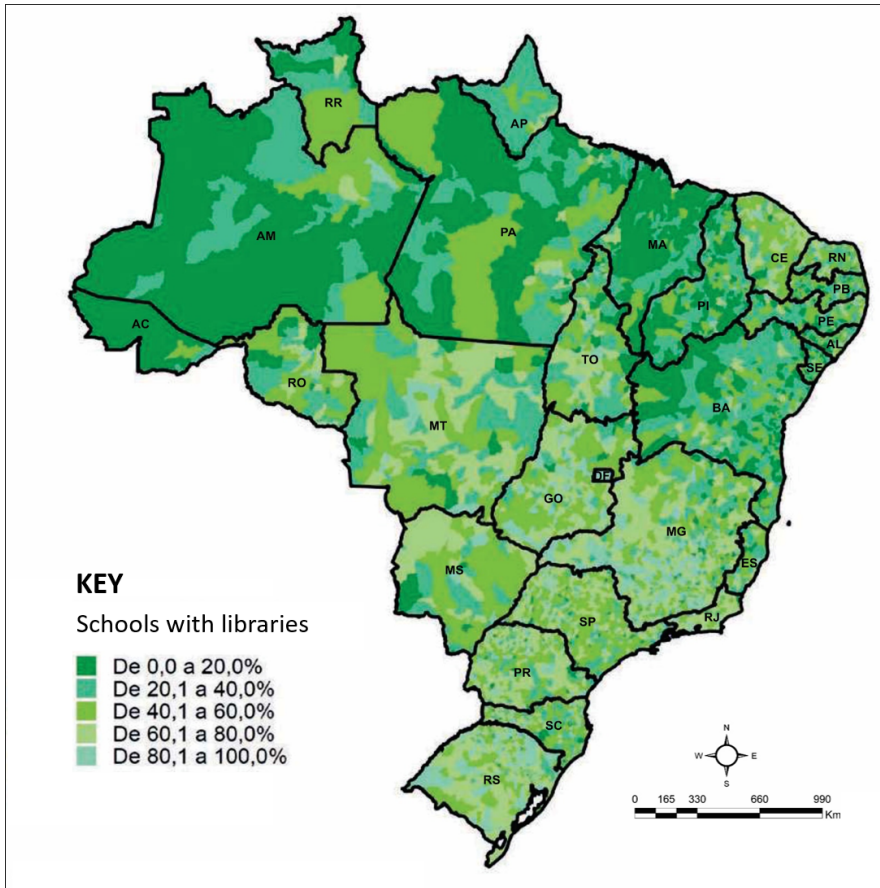
see their frameworks expanded by distinct notions, both republican and scientific, all of them necessary for the full practice of autonomy”. By restricting knowledge that it assesses as conflictive with a family’s moral convictions, the ESP subverts the meaning of Article 12. The exclusion of certain topics may also result in complicity with racism, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, among other offences.

Far from conceding to a pluralism of ideas, the ESP subscribes to a single standard of family and religion; it assigns itself with morality but remains indifferent to major milestones concerning human rights and cultural diversity. Denying such diversity and efforts to value it amounts to denying the school itself. This flaunts a basic principle of Article 3 of the Constitution (Brasil, 1988), which indicates as a major objective of a democratic State “to promote the well-being of all citizens, without prejudice of origin, race, gender, skin colour, age, and any other forms of discrimination” (my translation).

Criminalisation of teachers, the educational sector, and dispossession

A survey by the Ministry of Education (MEC) shows that less than half of Brazilian municipalities (45%, or 3,037 municipalities) pay wages that amount to the national wage floor (G1, 2017). Teachers’ low wages, infrastructural problems in schools, and poor working conditions help to explain the significant number of functional illiterates – 30% of Brazilians between 5 and 64 years old. The rate of absolute illiteracy calculated by IBGE ([2018]) remained at 7%, or 11.5 million people aged 15 or over. Numbers are even higher in states of the North and Northeast regions. The 2018 Basic Education Census also shows that many municipalities in these regions do not have libraries or reading spaces in 80% of their schools (Figure 2).

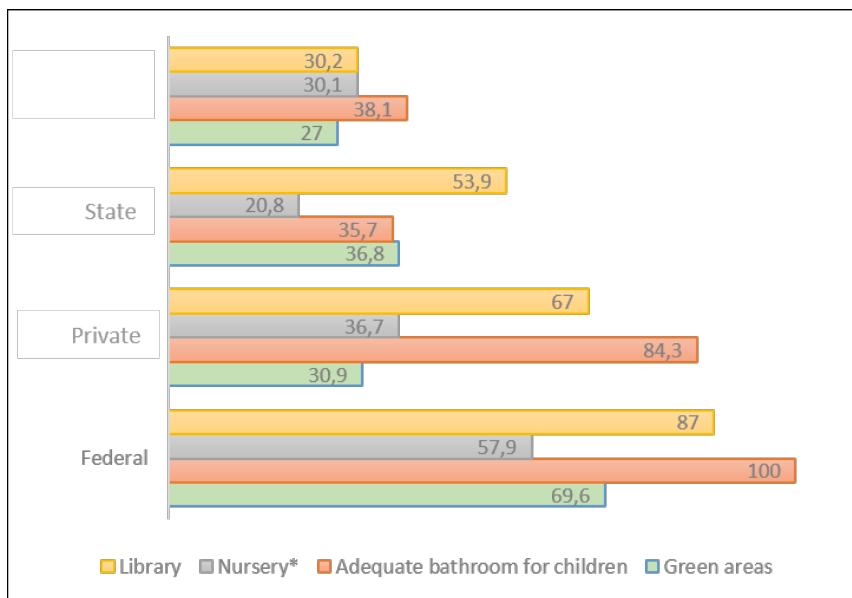
Figure 2 - Schools per municipality that house libraries in Brazil (2018)



Source: Amended from Inep (2019).

As shown in Figure 3, only 30.2% of pre-schools at municipal level have libraries. In elementary and high schools, rates are 40.1% and 80.3%, respectively (Figure 4). It is a daunting fact that only 31% of municipal schools which offer day-care centres have nurseries, whereas the number of schools with bathrooms suitable for children's education (38.1%) and green areas (27%) is also quite low.

Figure 3 - Pre-schools with libraries and other facilities in Brazil (2014-2018)

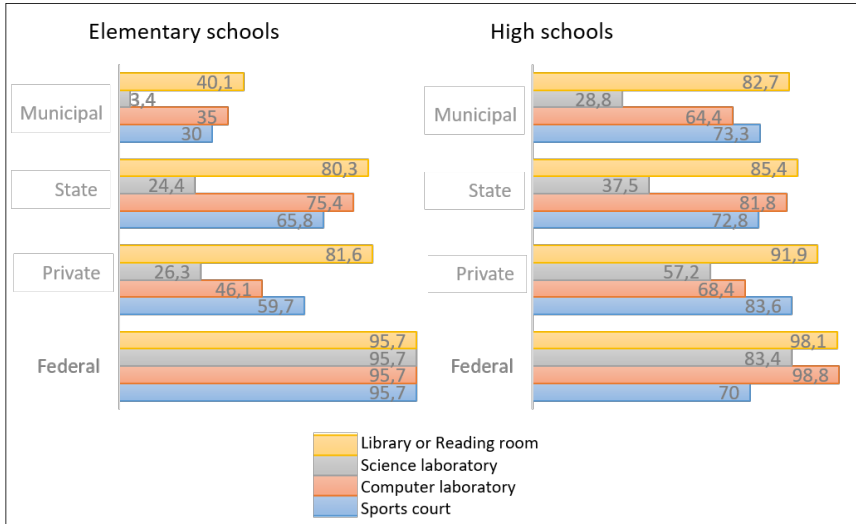


Source: Amended from Inep (2019).

*The percentages consider only schools with day care offer.

As for federal schools, science laboratories can be found in 95% of elementary schools and in 83.4% of high schools. However, these schools represent only 0.8% of enrolments in basic education nationwide. At municipal level, which accounts for 47.7% of enrolments, only 3.4% of elementary schools and 28.8% of high schools have science laboratories. At state level, this facility can be found in only 24.4% of elementary schools and in 37.5% of high schools (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Elementary and high schools with libraries and other facilities in Brazil (2018)



Source: Amended from Inep (2019).

Nevertheless, these statistics fail to sensitise ESP proponents. While hundreds of schools in Brazil barely have chairs, the movement campaigns for classroom surveillance and censorship of teachers’ work. Hence, it would be naïve to believe that the ESP may become sensitive to the real problems facing Brazilian schools. Its ultimate aim, “in addition to masking the real challenges in education, strives for control and the imposition of a single way of thinking, which associates it with other projects that attempt to co-opt the public educational system and turn it into big business” (Castilho, 2018, my translation). Reforms like those of secondary education and the establishment of guidelines which allow 30% of this educational level to be attended via distance learning, as well as the proposal of implementing Social Organisations (OS) in schools, are examples of this tendency and pave the way for a form of appropriation of teaching networks by large corporate groups which leads to what Harvey (2005) calls “accumulation through dispossession”.

This form of appropriation aims, above all, to have access to a significant share of public resources for its reproduction. For instance, according to the Transparency Portal of the Ministry of Transparency and

Comptroller-General of the Union (2018), R\$ 15.3 billion were invested in basic education. Although Brazil's investment per student is low, as will be explained further on, the decapitalisation of the public system constitutes a condition for public capitalisation of the private sector, as stressed by Arrais (2016). The amount assigned to basic education is, hence, highly attractive to corporate groups since State contracts ensure easy profit and enable other forms of profitable acquisitions. Other major factors include the offer of distance learning courses (which seriously jeopardise students' education) and subcontracting (which further enhances job insecurity).

Kropotkin (2009) was already aware of dispossession at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, having observed relations of oppression and dispossession stemming from the State's consubstantiated power. Nowadays, dispossession allows the liberation of assets so they can be lucratively appropriated by capital surplus. This is why Harvey (2005) contends that access to the financial system is a springboard for predation, fraud, and thievery. The considerable interest around the private sector's appropriation of educational systems also evokes an obsession with a technicist education intended for the large majority of students, particularly those whose parents are workers. Hence the school syllabus also becomes an arena for dispute between conservative and left-wing groups, which further reinforces the school's role as a dominant State apparatus (Althusser, 1980). Such a dispute, which also acquires a partisan nature, further disrupts the debate on the future of education in Brazil, draws attention away from its real problems, and distances the school even more from autonomy.

An even more serious implication concerns the tendency of ESP supporters to hold teachers responsible for a supposed failure in school education, since such a tendency ultimately conceals real problems facing schools and further escalates tensions around the educational agenda. This is an ominous prospect, given that efforts are misdirected to equivocal dilemmas. To the extent that teachers in Brazil already carry a disproportionate burden as a result of low wages and tough working conditions, holding them to account tends to worsen relations in the school environment even more.

In an interview for the *Correio Brasiliense* newspaper in November 2018 (Oliveto, 2018), a 38-year-old teacher from the Federal District claims that, despite having to deal with students' rebelliousness, she never

thought she would reach the point of becoming ill. According to the report, she has received threats and been subject to harassment, while students have pointed their mobile phones at her during lessons. Moreover, she received a message on her social media account saying she would be tortured for “gender ideology”. She contends that she has never endorsed any sort of indoctrination because the school is, or should be, a place for unrestricted debate. However, after “giving a lesson on civil rights, on women’s vote, and being accused of gender ideology, something which doesn’t even exist” (Oliveto, 2018, my translation), she now considers leaving the profession.

Many teachers, particularly those working in private schools, are afraid of being sued, a fear which has generated a kind of self-censorship. Even though many legal suits against teachers fail to go ahead, reports show that censorship, harassment, and persecution have become increasingly common in schools across the country.¹ In some cases, harassment ensues from colleagues or from other members of staff, a fact that immediately evokes the dystopias alluded to in the Introduction, particularly their reference to the surveillance performed voluntarily by those who are, in essence, affected by it.

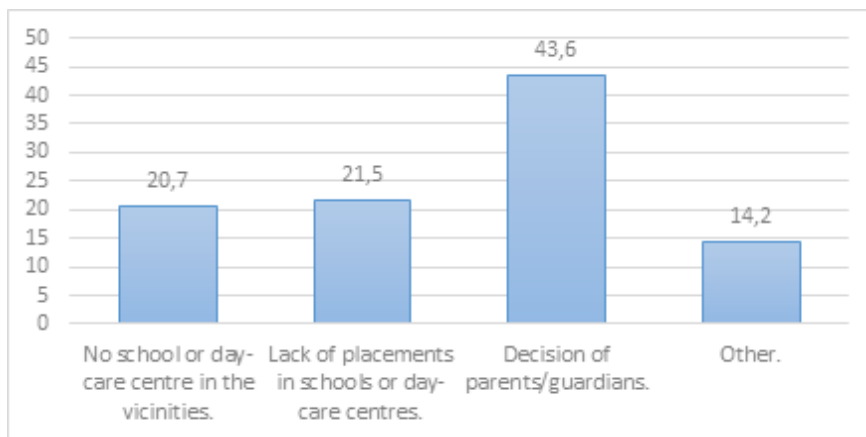
Holding teachers accountable for educational problems and encouraging censorship only deepen relations of hate and vigilance. The ESP goes so far as to refer to teachers and students as competitors on its website (ESP, [2018?]). It is not difficult to learn of statements from its proponents calling teachers “abusers”, “aggressors”, “indoctrinators”, “uneducators of children”. Such rhetoric conveys the idea that teachers are students’ rivals and enemies of education. There is no doubt, thus, that these attacks make up the ESP’s strategy to fight for hegemony in schools and thwart any perspective that heads in a different direction.

Holding teachers accountable for educational problems, moreover, only worsens the situation. Nevertheless, one of the ESP’s underlying aims is precisely to flare up the school debate and draw attention away from social demands, such as investments in public education. This is why thousands of schools devoid of basic working conditions fail to sensitise ESP proponents. The movement will only concern itself with investments once corporate groups have access to education’s resources via dispossession. Little concern is paid to teachers’ low wages (which may become even lower following outsourcing), to the terrible working

conditions of the majority of Brazilian schools, or to recent cuts in education budgets.

According to the Secretariat of the National Treasury, the period from 2013 to 2018 saw a 66% reduction of investments in education (DCI, 2018). Another daunting statistic pertains to the number of children from 0 to 5 years old who do not attend school. According to IBGE ([2018]), 7.3 million children did not attend school in 2017, while 196,000 children between 4 and 5 years old did not attend school due to lack of placements or to the absence of schools close to their homes (Figure 5). A study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that Brazil annually invests US\$ 3,800 per student in basic education, considerably less than the average invested by the other member countries, which is US\$ 8,700 up to the fifth grade and US\$ 10,500 in the remaining years of primary and secondary education (OCDE, 2018).

Figure 5 - Reasons why children between 4 and 5 years old do not attend schools in Brazil (2018) – in %



Source: Amended from IBGE [2018].

Such low investments also have repercussions in teachers' working conditions, particularly in public schools. The lack of encouragement for the teaching profession in Brazil may affect negatively students' wish to pursue *licenciatura* courses or the quality of teacher training. A study

carried out in 35 countries shows that Brazil is the one that least values teachers (Dolton et al., 2018).

Once again, these statistics do not sensitise the ESP, given its underlying campaign to criminalise teachers. The movement's quarrel with teachers' work needs to be addressed and exposed. However, the debate concerning educational problems cannot be reduced to the ESP's agenda; beyond the call for censoring and criminalising teachers, there is a broader project that aims to turn education into big business, assign a shorter technicist syllabus (partly effected through distance learning) to specific students, above all those whose parents are workers, and impose a set of measures that seek to undermine pedagogical autonomy and increase control over schools. These factors explain the incentives for monitoring and stalking teachers. A critique of the ESP, however, cannot be conducted on its own. There is a broader struggle that precedes this debate: it concerns the kind of school we wish to pursue.

(Non-)Final considerations: what kind of school do we want?

There is a covert link between the ESP and a broader agenda of power. Critically assessing such a link and fighting against it are vital, but neither can be achieved without first defining what kind of school we want. The critique of the ESP thus cannot be followed by a conformist attitude with regard to the school we have, especially since excessive control – both of the school syllabus and of formative processes – predates this century. The main issue, obviously, is that the ESP supports even more radical forms of control, and episodes of persecution are already being witnessed nationwide.

Thus, the current scenario demands caution, intense dialogue, awareness, and collective proposal of alternatives. A critical assessment of the ESP's real intentions is crucial to avoid efforts in the wrong direction, given that the majority of issues raised by the movement are nothing more than smokescreens, purposefully spread to deviate attention and conceal ulterior interests. Therefore, education-related problems must be addressed, first and foremost, by those who actually experience and are familiar with school reality. The leading role of these individuals is of the utmost importance, but it is also paramount to build more effective connections and approximations that foster dialogue, collective efforts and actions for a more autonomous school.

Such a challenge must also be taken up by workers and students from other institutions, such as universities; the distance that currently separates them from school life, with rare exceptions, needs to be reduced so that rhetoric gives way to union and confrontation. Only by establishing closer ties with real schools, their dramas and challenges, will it be possible to protect them from neoliberal offensives and foster their true potential towards achieving autonomy. On the other hand, if communication channels are not put in place and if we are not capable of fighting for the school we want, inertia will pave the way for even more authoritarian, monitored, and punitive schools.

On a more immediate scale, it is vital that teachers effectively take control of their profession, because the fight for teaching practices cannot be put up without due confidence. Data produced by the IBGE ([2018]) show that a teacher in Brazil earns up to 39% less than other professionals with a similar level of education. This is combined with poor working conditions and persecution of the freedom of teaching. However, establishing a different perspective of valuing these workers will not result from a top-down approach. Such a perspective must be achieved and requires greater involvement, leadership, and drive on the part of those involved with the profession.

Still on a more immediate scale, basic education demands must be duly defended by those who have a real commitment with a public and high-quality school system. Ranking among such demands are: 1) schools with adequate infrastructure for effective learning; 2) better wages and working conditions for teachers, hence enabling them to develop their professional practice while safeguarding the specificities of each body of knowledge; 3) irreducible guarantee of teachers' pedagogical autonomy (regardless of their political and ideological stance) and of students' learning process (Castilho, 2018). Defending these issues is paramount, since what is at stake is the autonomy of schools. Each victory over any form of restriction of liberties will mean a step forward in the fight for a more autonomous school.

This fight calls for the effective involvement of teachers, students, and members of staff in schools' management and daily routines. Such a leading role, together with free research, will expand access to education and to the development of scientific thinking. Without freedom, interaction, mediation, and encouragement of one's imagination, the

production process of knowledge becomes constrained. Therefore, it is crucial that the school be a place where universal values like collaboration, solidarity, and respect for differences be promoted. This allows one to assign new meanings to experiences so that competition, censorship, and persecution are replaced by cooperation and mutual support, in a process in which all those involved advance together.

Without ever giving up on science and freedom, we must take up these challenges and fight for the school we want. It will undoubtedly remain a place of dispute, but, unlike the ESP's claims, such a dispute is not made up of only two sides. Life, politics, and knowledge are much broader, challenging, and diverse. Hence the school will never comprise a territory of a single line of thinking – it translates the movement of the world, social diversity, and its paradoxes. Hence, if it is the object of dispute, it can also be a place for struggle – after all, current times may signal control and persecution, but spaces will always be instances of dissidence and change.

Notes

1 Accounts of teachers' persecution, wrongful dismissal, intimidation, etc. have surfaced across the country. As a result, a set of initiatives proposed by several organisations and by the federal Public Prosecutor's Office, among them the publication of the *Manual de defesa contra a censura nas escolas* [Defence Manual Against Censorship in Schools] (2018), have been put forward to provide legal information and assistance to teachers.

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