

Address to Commonwealth Teachers Forum

Mauritius

Introduction:

Colleagues, it makes sense to me to begin a discussion on privatisation in education with a consideration of the role and importance of public education.

Education is a human right and a public good, it enables people to achieve their maximum potential and to better understand themselves and their role and relationships. Education serves both the values of the society at local and global levels, as well as cultural, democratic, social, economic and environmental needs. Public schools are where all young people regardless of background are accepted to learn together and learn to live together, developing the knowledge, the intellectual and social skills and values to be responsible citizens.

Governments are responsible for ensuring that quality public education is accessible to all.

This may sound very obvious to most of us, but the notion that public school systems are crucial to the achievement of social cohesion and to promote democratic development is fading.

Today in education we face, economically, socially and politically, challenges unlike we have faced before. To put it bluntly: public education as we know it is under attack, the teaching profession is under attack and yes, teacher unions are under attack - in the industrial economies, in the emerging democracies and in the developing countries.

The public sector is still facing the full brunt of the economic and debt crises. The European-wide austerity drive is destroying public services including education on a massive scale. Central and Eastern Europe school systems may collapse under the sledgehammer of the International Monetary Fund. Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy are forced to pursue horrendous austerity measures in exchange for loans from richer EU countries. Thousands of teachers have been laid off in the US.

And while the developed countries concentrate on finding a way out of the crisis, the most vulnerable of all, people in the low-income countries, people in the South, will be worse off than ever. Public school systems in Africa and Asia are under great pressure as governments are once again forced by the IMF and other financial institutions to reduce public spending while development aid from the developed to the developing world is drying up. (Let me remind you that 70% of Education International's members live beneath the poverty line.)

This attack on public education is not simply the result of the current global crisis. It began when a generation of economists pushed the notion that unrestricted free markets were the road to prosperity, and that governments should "get out of the way". This neo-liberal political and economic agenda served powerful interests. Globalisation of the economy raised the stakes even higher.

Many thought that when the Global Financial Crisis exposed the failures of neoliberalism and the unfettered market we would see the emergence of a new world order and new paradigm. A new paradigm which would see a reassertion of the 'public good' and a renewed embrace of civil society with a new commitment to its fundamental pillars of human rights, trade union rights, social justice and of course quality public education for all. As we continue to observe, this is not the case. Around the world we are being confronted with new challenges, deeper challenges.

One of these challenges is the worldwide expansion of privatisation, which is having an enormous impact on the provision of public education. Recognising the serious threat which many forms of privatisation represents to education, EI commissioned a major study which was undertaken by Stephen Ball and Deborah Youdell.

Their study found that there are two key forms of privatisation:

1. the imposition of private sector ideas, techniques and practices onto the public sector to make them more like businesses [witness the expansion of quasi-markets, performance management, market-driven notions of accountability, performance pay, service contracting, competitive funding] and

- the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education

What they found raised fundamental questions concerning what education is about – its core values:

[Fred's foreword to the study]:

To put it in the starker possible way: is education about giving each child, each young person, the opportunity to develop his or her full potential as a person and as a member of society? Or is education to be a service sold to clients, who are considered from a young age to be consumers and targets for marketing?

There are many examples of the impact of the introduction of private sector management practices in our classrooms and in our schools. These are the antithesis of the learning environments we seek for all children in all parts of the world. Performance measurement, high stakes standardized testing, the ranking of schools, students and their teachers, “incentivizing” teachers with bonus pay based on flawed and narrow measurements, governance models that promote competition and restrict entry into schools: all of these strategies militate against building a robust high quality system of well resourced public schools for all.

In this market driven, competitive world, school leaders are transformed from educational leaders to managers and teachers work is changed as they are forced to prioritise high stakes tests in the name of ‘accountability’. These are a form of de-professionalisation – a major challenge we face today.

Further, studies frequently show that marketised education systems result in increased inequality , as they can lead to segregation and homogenisation of student populations, as schools seek to ensure a student population which is most likely to perform well ‘in the education marketplace’ – as measured by test scores and the like.

The commodification and marketisation of education in many industrialized countries comes in various policy forms whether it is a voucher system, a charter school, a so called ‘free school’ or academy or shifting funds from public to private schools. Ultimately these represent a continuum along the path to privatisation.

In such a world, politicians and elected governments abrogate their obligations and in doing so evade any notion of accountability for the guarantee of quality public education from one generation to the next.

Advocates of charter schools in the US, the Free Schools in Sweden and more recently academies in the UK, argue that applying the free-market principles of choice and competition to the running of schools will drive standards up across the system. Removing schools from state control and transferring public funds to private organisations to run them will see their results improve and compel state schools to work harder to keep up with them, or so the argument goes.

But is it borne out by the evidence? In the US, where charter schools have been operating since 1991, many studies have shown that they haven’t had a significant impact on student outcomes for the majority of students and are not systematically improving performance. A recent national study by CREDO (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes) at Stanford University covered 16 states and more than 70% of the students attending charter schools in the US. Its report (*Multiple Choice: Charter school performance in 16 states* (2009)) concluded that “in aggregate, students in charter schools are not faring as well as students in traditional public schools.” It found that 17% of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than their public school counterparts, 37% were worse than the public school; with the remaining 46 % having no significant difference.

Recent reviews of evidence from Sweden show that educational attainment across the Swedish system has actually declined since the introduction of Free Schools. Rather, the effect has been increasing segregation in terms of pupils’ socio-cultural background, performance and ethnicity. For example, analysis of PISA 2009 results by the Swedish National Agency for Education [Skolverket] shows that Sweden “has lost its leading position, and currently performs no

better than an average country. The differences between high and low performing students have increased, and the differences between high and low performing schools have also increased. In addition, a student's socio-economic background has become more important in determining performance, and is now more important in Sweden compared to other OECD countries". [Quote is from the agency itself]

Even the [then] Swedish Education Minister, Bertil Ostberg, warned the UK in 2010 against the newly elected Cameron government's plans to implement 'Free Schools'

We have actually seen a fall in the quality of Swedish schools since the free schools were introduced. ... The free schools are generally attended by children of better educated and wealthy families, making things even more difficult for children attending ordinary schools in poor areas.

Colleagues, let's turn to another significant aspect of privatisation – the proliferation of PPPs & MSPEs

Governments and international agencies are increasingly looking to the private sector for the solution to achieving the MDGs and EFA targets. Public-private partnerships, PPPs are held out as the way forward to achieve education for all. PPPs are generally joint government and for-profit or commercial initiatives and it is clear that they too take us further down the path of commercialization of education which challenges and undermines the very essence of education as a public good.

And there is considerable evidence of a direct negative impact on equity and access to quality education

Take India for example where the national Government is establishing 2500 PPP schools. The EI affiliates in India are opposed to the Public Private Partnership in education as they believe the evidence shows that these schools are not beneficial to the economically weaker sections of the society and are detrimental to the quality of education and the status of teachers.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships in education (MSPEs) are another form of government and private initiative, promoted by international organisations and the WEF which promotes this as a development model with the private sector aiming to assist countries to meet the MDGs.

They differ from PPPs in that they bring together a broader group of players/stakeholders than just the public and the private sectors – including civil society, academic institutions and other NGOs .

Nevertheless, there are serious questions which need to be addressed in relation to MSPEs and their impact on public education; questions such as:

- the public/democratic control of public education,
- unsustainability of programs,
- the real possibility of education policy moving into the hands of a network of entrepreneurial think tanks, corporate entrepreneurs, and lobbyists,
- the program approach of MSPs rather than the policy need determined by government,
- the balance of power within the partnership- does a trade union or other civil partner have an equal voice and influence to the private sector partner providing the finance?

They are not a viable alternative to public funding of education, if for no other reason than that they can lead to governments reducing their financial commitments and promote further privatisation of public education and commercialisation of educational services.

The risks are huge when the future of public education is at stake.

Education is a public good not a commodity and its financing and provision is a fundamental responsibility of governments which must be supported and provided through adequate fiscal policy and funding arrangements.

An adequate revenue base is essential for meeting this responsibility to provide free, universally accessible, quality public education. While many

governments have used the global economic crisis as a justification for not delivering on their commitments to properly resource public education, a recent EI study on corporate tax shows that between \$10 & \$ 15 trillion could have been collected if countries cooperate to make fiscal engineering by international corporations more difficult. Reforming international fiscal and taxation arrangements, which form part of the global economic architecture, would increase the financial resources necessary to provide long-term sustainable funding for quality public education world-wide.

Countries which do not have the capacity to provide education for all must not be forced to be dependent on the benevolence of the private sector or be at the mercy of profiteers. International aid and assistance must be provided where the state does not have the capacity to provide quality education for all – aid which is developed in cooperation with local organisations including education unions.

Privatisation of education results in an inevitable shift to a market-based approach to employment and governance, and constraints on the role of education unions and collective bargaining. This can bring about an increase in individual contracts and other insecure employment conditions, introduction of performance related pay and an undermining of teacher working conditions as well as a move away from the employment of qualified teachers.

And there are many other forms of privatisation of education that can be mentioned.

For example, the increasing number of low fee paying schools in many countries, including here in Africa. Low cost private schools, such as those found in Uganda and South Africa, are often touted as the solution to the Education for All (EFA) challenge. These schools, some of them in receipt of public funds, impact on the viability of the nearby public school which after all accept all students. A study carried out by EI in Uganda in 2007 revealed that teachers employed in low cost private schools were often employed on short-term contracts, paid between 40 and 60% less than their counterparts in public schools and had no social security. Those who complained about their precarious working conditions were often dismissed without benefits.

Other examples of privatisation include, the contracting out to the private sector of educational services including curriculum development, the public funding of private schools and most insidious of all- public schools being handed over for private profit.

At this point let me refer to the comprehensive education policy statement which the World Congress of Education International adopted a year ago in Cape Town. We are strongly advocating these ideals, principles and policies in the international community. And not without result. Organizations such as the UN, UNESCO, ILO, OECD and the World Bank do listen to us, even share some of our concerns, but, ultimately, decisions are to be taken at the national levels, in our countries. We can influence those decisions.

Let me conclude: the world-wide privatisation of education, in many of its different forms, represents a serious threat to public education.

It is transforming labour relations and teachers' work in ways that have a negative impact on schooling.

It is transforming education from a public good to a private commodity.

It is deepening educational inequalities both within and between countries.

We must reassert and fight for the values which underpin our vision for education and society – values which are antithetical to the commercialisation and privatisation of education:

- education is a fundamental human right
- education is a public good not a commodity
- public education is central to the social and economic wellbeing of our societies; to reducing poverty; to building peace and defending democracy; to individual fulfillment and to sustainable development; to promoting social justice at a time of growing inequality within and between societies;

In short, high quality, publicly funded, democratically accountable education is fundamental to the social and economic wellbeing of our societies, and the future of successive generations.

We face in so many countries, more than ever, I believe, a crossing of the roads. One path leads towards de-professionalization, weakening of unions, especially in the public sector, and continuing inequity in society. The other road leads to a new vision for the teaching profession in the 21st century, quality education and opportunities for all, quality public services for all, equity, justice and sustainable growth.

The key message is this: We are not, must not, be mere bystanders watching to see which road the governments will take. We are not for gloom and doom. Through the union movement, through a united profession, through our impact on public opinion, we can muster the strength to have our elected representatives to make the right choices.

Colleagues, let us be very clear: A new global economy must be built on a stronger foundation – based on the education, the skills and the capacities of citizens, based on equity and justice, and based on quality public services. The stakes are high.

Together, through our education unions and in solidarity with others, we can make a difference. That conviction – that we can make a difference – must drive us forward. Quality public education and solidarity are powerful weapons. Solidarity between nations, solidarity between trade unions, solidarity between people. And quality education for everybody. That is the challenge before all of us today in the Commonwealth.