

Carrying the Community

Addressing the Consequences of Privatization and Funding Shortfalls for Education Support Personnel

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Executive Summary

Education Support Personnel (ESP) are central to achieving inclusive, quality education for all – a commitment formalized in the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 4.

In recent decades, the numbers and roles of administration and clerical personnel, librarians, food and nutrition personnel, security and transport personnel, and other support roles in schools have expanded along with efforts to extend quality primary and secondary education to all. Among other things, ESP play a critical role in ensuring that students receive financial support, are fed, receive culturally responsive and individualized instruction, and get to school safely, all the while pedagogically interacting with children and their families. Their work is essential to sustaining educational communities and the students within them – especially those who have been historically excluded or marginalized.

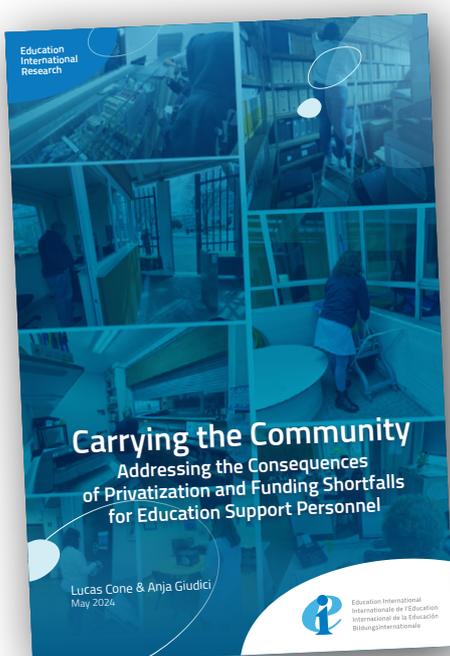
This report documents how privatization and public funding shortfalls are threatening the conditions that allow ESP to contribute to the realization of universal, inclusive, quality education. Building on an extensive literature review, as well as interviews and participatory research with ESP and union representatives located in different regions, the report documents how global trends to cut funding and outsource responsibilities in public education place ESP at increased risk of unemployment, devaluation, and material neglect.

The report defines privatization as efforts to narrow the definition of what is included and valued in public education based on either economic, social, or technological rationales. It shows that the contributions that ESP can make to schooling are inextricably linked to the structures, policies, and financial decisions that shape what is included and valued in public education – and what is



made invisible. In particular, the report illustrates the negative effects of current tendencies to narrow the focus of public education to individual learning outcomes and classroom instruction, rather than protecting more comprehensive visions of public schooling.

In practice, privatization takes the form of concrete measures of outsourcing, austerity, or de-monopolization of public services that rely on such narrow definitions of education. The report examines the detrimental effects of such measures in relation to the pedagogical, material, and social dimensions of the work of ESP. The report then moves on to outline promising avenues of resistance shared by union representatives and individual support personnel.



The full research paper, in English, can be found here: <https://eiie.io/2024carryingcommunity>

Pedagogical Dimension

ESP bring unique skills, relational capacities, and cultural knowledges to educational communities in ways that are qualitatively different from and complementary to teacher-led instruction. Yet for schools to make use of these assets, it is essential that ESP are integrated into a school's pedagogical project, have a clearly defined role, are able to forge links between schools and communities, and have opportunities to update their skills and knowledge.

The report shows that privatization and funding shortfalls negatively affect the likelihood of such conditions materializing.

Deteriorating working conditions and staff shortages are leading to increasingly heavy and fragmented workloads, while the rise of outsourcing and precarious contracts means higher rates of staff turnover. For ESP, many of whom are informally qualified, the fragmentation of tasks and lack of proper recognition often means that they are forced to circulate between jobs and locations. As a result, they lack the time, resources, and relations that allow them to engage in the collaboration and training that would enable them to develop integrated pedagogical approaches in schools.

Funding shortfalls further incentivize the use of outsourcing and the hiring of unqualified staff, while reducing the resources available for professional development. This has implications for the overall quality of schooling and the ability of schools to serve historically marginalized student populations. For the careers of ESP, precarious contracts and lack of access to professional development also mean that they are at risk of being trapped in low-paid positions.

Material Dimension

ESP positions imply very different material conditions depending on the role and local context. As a result, privatization and funding shortfalls have different impacts on material conditions such as workload, benefits, pay, and safety at work. They range from increased overtime, to loss of benefits, to the redefinition of one's work a "voluntary" role. The effects are particularly severe in the Global South and in roles requiring lower formal qualifications.

But the devaluation of public services affects all ESP and intersects with the gendered and intersectional aspects of some ESP roles – which are more likely to be held by women and ethnic minorities. Even in countries where ESP positions are still filled through competitive examinations and offer stable careers with reasonable workloads, benefits, pay, and safe conditions, privatization and funding shortfalls either worsen working conditions or allow employers to circumvent regulations and hire staff through alternative, more insecure, channels.

As a result, many ESP have seen their wages decline in recent decades, especially in sectors that have been outsourced. Their work is further devalued by the increased overtime that many ESP must work to cover for colleagues, deal with students in distress, and address problems in the school community, as well as by cuts in benefits. The report also documents how strategies related to privatization – including precarious and short-term contracts as a result of outsourcing, new forms of performance accountability, and deregulation coupled with school choice – not only increase levels of job insecurity, but also mean that certain ESP roles, such as maintenance or food and nutrition personnel, are increasingly required to work in unfamiliar environments that threaten their health and safety.

Social Dimension

Because they require different formal qualifications and have different degrees of visibility, the social status of ESP roles has always varied. For cultural and structural reasons, as well as for reasons of discrimination, the pedagogical value implied in the tasks and skills of, for example, a school psychologist or a teacher, is in many places more easily recognized than that of a transportation staff or a security guard.

Privatization, the report shows, risks entrenching such hierarchies in education. Deteriorating working conditions place a heavier workload on those already in vulnerable positions and may further obscure their pedagogical dimension, thus distancing them from the communities they help carry. Social devaluation puts these roles at further risk of outsourcing and layoffs, potentially triggering a downward spiral.

But privatization and public funding shortfalls also affect all categories of staff in public education, by devaluing work done in the sector relative to work done outside of it. The skills of both the formally qualified school psychologist and the informally qualified maintenance worker are transferable to other sectors. Both therefore face the dilemma of whether to stay and see their work devalued by negative stereotypes of the public sector and by gendered notions that educational work is rewarded by "love" rather than by pay and status, or to move to more remunerative sectors. This has obvious implications for the public sector's ability to recruit and retain staff and for its structural longevity. But it also has an impact on the level of unionization and voice of ESP, which enables and encourages them to participate in shaping schools and society.

Resistance

Finally, the report outlines four types of resistance shared by union representatives and individual ESP that open toward possible ways of countering the developments discussed.

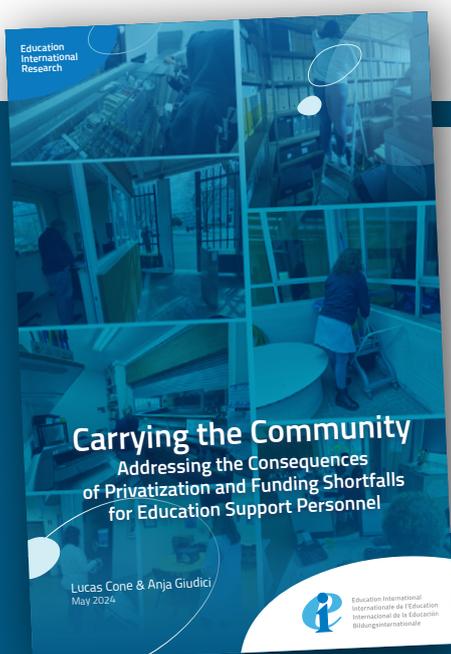
Since the working conditions of ESP are inextricably linked to definitions and understandings of “publicness” in education, the first strategy is to reclaim a comprehensive definition of public education that includes both the contributions of teachers and ESP as essential components of inclusive, quality schooling. This requires both conceptual work to address the hierarchies among educational personnel and strategic efforts to disseminate this concept to policymakers, school communities, and the wider public.

A second set of strategies focuses on increasing the visibility of ESP and their pedagogical contributions, and how privatization threatens their materialization. The report includes examples of concrete campaigns targeting different audiences, both online and in the field of practice. Third, we share strategies that union representatives have successfully used to directly improve ESP working conditions,

whether by building larger coalitions to defend the public sector, building capacity, or lobbying politicians and stakeholders. A final set of strategies focuses on refining arguments and strategies by reaching out to researchers and the international community.

Taken together, the report demonstrates the pervasive and negative impact of privatization and funding shortfalls on the working conditions of education support personnel. But it also vividly illustrates the value that education support staff bring to our educational communities. As part of their role, all ESP work with children and families in an educational capacity. At the same time, without these professionals, schools would not be warm (or cold) and clean, children would go hungry, their behavioral issues and health issues would go unaddressed, and they might not make it to school safely.

It is our hope that this report can provide a foundation for unions and others to discuss the value and structural recognition of ESP locally and internationally. Securing better conditions for education support personnel is critical to providing a better education for students – and to moving towards more inclusive, caring, and equal societies.



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