

OPINION

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Fixing private-sector language schools

How many teachers did you know who started off teaching English, or another language, in private companies in this country with great enthusiasm, with a real desire to be creative and dynamic and to enjoy their teaching as much as they wanted their students to enjoy their classes? Maybe you were one of them.

Now, how many of those teachers still feel that way, several years later? Do you?

If your answers are "not many," "not me," then maybe you're asking the same questions we are.

Why is it that a high proportion of teachers feel de-motivated, undervalued and disrespected, or far worse? Through our own and others' experience we have some idea of the answers. Are ours the same as yours?

Maybe you know what it's like to juggle different part-time jobs, plus your private classes, in order to earn a living wage? Or be available anytime between 8am-10pm with classes spread out during the day and little chance of a life outside teaching? Or spend hours travelling to classes without that time being paid for?

Five years ago the dramatic bankruptcies of schools such as Opening and Brighton put conditions in the English teaching private sector in the spotlight. It seemed that parts of the sector were in crisis, but as a whole it weathered the storm and the students kept on coming.

Where are we now?

So where are we now? Is it a sector to be proud and happy to work in, or does continue to be undervalued? Many teachers who live it day in day out would say the latter is true.

We know that the majority of teachers are dedicated and committed to their students' learning and of course that not all companies can be tarnished with the



An English-language teacher holding class in a local private school/CCOO

same brush. But why is it that quality so often comes in spite of the way we are treated by our employers, and not because of it?

How many employers see the link between quality of teaching and the quality of working conditions for their staff?

What do we mean by quality working conditions? A lot of teachers are surprised to hear that there is a legal minimum standard for working conditions in private-sector language schools and companies: it's called the *Conveni d'Ensenyament Privat de Catalunya*. Some companies actually offer conditions that are better than some of those in that agreement, but they are the exception to the rule.

Quality conditions mean applying the *conveni*, eliminating fraudulent use of temporary contracts year after year, replacing them with legal and permanent

contracts; respecting social security law and receiving all our wages in the payslip, and all our social security payments.

Any union rep in this sector knows what a struggle it is to get the *conveni* recognised in full, in part, or even at all. And many teachers work in an atmosphere of fear promoted by some companies to keep staff compliant and ignorant of their rights (ever heard the message directly or implicitly, "there's always another teacher waiting to fill your shoes tomorrow"?)

Yet, the law is on the workers' side. So why should it be such a struggle to ensure it is applied?

This sector is crucial to the Catalan economy. The Generalitat wants Catalonia to be trilingual, giving priority to English in public and private education. There is no shortage of demand for English teachers, and companies increasingly

offer in-house classes to improve their staffs' linguistic skills.

There have also been initiatives such as the "Decàleg per a la formació de qualitat en idiomes" (Education guidelines for quality language teaching), a voluntary commitment signed by 13 institutes and universities.

Absence of political will

What's missing, however, is the political commitment from the top. If the Generalitat really wants a trilingual Catalonia, when will it commit to a tighter regulation of private-sector language schools to ensure minimum standards in education and legal and decent working conditions for staff?

This commitment could come in the form of inspections of private schools, or a certificate of quality awarded to schools that fulfil the basic minimum standards. Also, public funding could be made contingent on a school's compliance with those standards.

CCOO supports teachers in English. Recently 400 ex-Opening employees, represented by CCOO lawyers, finally received all the unpaid wages and redundancy pay to which they were due, all €2.7 million of it (on average, €6,750 per worker). It took five years, but better late than never.

Also, the CCOO union recently set up a Grup d'Idiomes to bring together staff from different schools to work together to improve the situation.

CCOO can help with your questions and concerns. Our next workshops, given in English—"Everything you wanted to know about your rights... but were afraid to ask"—will be offered on May 16 (7.30pm) and May 18 (10.30am), at CCOO in Barcelona (Via Laietana 16). To book a place, call 93 481 2842. If you have questions contact us directly, or send an e-mail: enseprivada@ccoo.cat.