

Surf, magic and feminism: Public school students get the classes of their dreams

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Jessica Rodrigues de Borba, 16 years old, wanted to talk about sexism and racism at the public school where she studies, in the extreme south of Sao Paulo. However, she could not find a space for such a debate. "No one ever talks about those topics in the classroom", the student told BBC Brazil. "We learn the very basics when it comes to racism. And nothing when it comes to feminism. But those are important issues, that everyone should be aware of."

In the end of October, however, she managed to have volunteers in her school to give an extracurricular class about both themes, attended by 170 of Jessica's colleagues. "Now I will ask for a lecture on age of criminal responsibility", she says. "It is a topic that teachers run from."

Jessica's request came true thanks to Quero na Escola, a project created by four journalists that aims to bring society closer to public schools. Through the website www.queronaescola.com.br, students of public schools all over Brazil can ask for the classes they would like to have beyond the mandatory curriculum.

A student from a public school of Sao Paulo asked for magic tricks. Another one, in Florianopolis, wants to learn how to surf. In a school of Belo Horizonte, the desire is to learn how to write comic books. The idea is that volunteers from civil society attend to those requests, giving free classes on the request themes inside the schools.

"They want a lot of things"

In two months, Quero na Escola registered 11 schools (so far, in São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Santa Catarina) and received 65 requests. Thirty-two volunteers were also registered, and so far they have attended to the first 10 requests, reaching about 300 students with classes, lectures or workshops on themes such as graffiti, pottery, storytelling and photography.

"By interviewing students in schools, we noticed that they wanted a lot of things, even though they are sometimes considered to have little interest [in learning]", says Cinthia Rodrigues, one of the project's creators.

"The turning point for us was hearing a 15-year-old student say she wanted to take creative writing classes. As journalists, we could teach her that. So we thought: what if there was a way to give all students the chance to say what they want in their school?. We also want to create a connexion - to introduce the school to society. If the school gate stays open, education will be a real part of citizen's everyday lives."

The first volunteers came from the founders' own personal network, but the idea is to spread the word. "We also want to have the electrician and the pizza guy as volunteers."

For Ricardo Falzetta, content manager at the organization Todos Pela Educação ["All for Education"], the project has the potencial to increase student's interest for the last few

years of basic education and high school - the ladder being the most problematic phase of Brazilian educational system - and to allow civil society to “actually understand what goes on inside [public] schools”. “Society gives importance to education in speech. This is a opportunity not only for demanding [improvement], but for understanding education through the perspective of a collaborator.”

In his opinion, a second step of the project, which could be taken by schools themselves, would be to associate requests made through Quero na Escola with the mandatory curriculum given to students. It would be a way to potencialize results - for example, by stimulating requests that could compliment what is taught in the classroom.

“I don’t learn anything”

Teo Ferreira Dias, 18 years old, had his request fulfilled: he took a pottery class in his school, located in the west part of Sao Paulo. Now he wants to organize his colleagues for another request - a drawing workshop.

“It was nice to value school not just because of learning, but for things we like”, he says. “I feel that [teachers] resist to some requests made by the students. When we suggest learning something different, they tend to not teach. They already have a lot of content to give and sometime there is no time. Often they lose time having to ask for students to have more discipline.”

According to Cinthia, the project actually started as a way to help teachers. “In our research, we noticed that they feel very bad, even though they are such winners. A lot of them are poorly payed and seen by society as unmotivated. They are on the edge, in spite of the desire to do a good job.”

Júlia Rodrigues dos Santos, 15 years old, a colleague of Teo, asked for a photography class. “Is the kind of thing that will have no value in vestibular [the national tests that allow students into universities], so people don’t pay much attention to it”, she says. “Someone had asked for a photography class to the Arts teacher. He said he would loved to do it, but couldn’t, because it was not a part of the school’s curriculum.”

Julia says she enjoyed learning about the history of photography, as well as doing the practical exercises proposed by the volunteer. “Now I know how to control the entrance of light in my camera. And when I am taking a photo with my phone, I can think better about how to frame it.”

Reading

Some of the requests led to only one workshop. Others have become regular activities in schools. In Escola Estadual José Cândido de Souza, a school in Pompeia, a neighborhood in the west of Sao Paulo, principal Elizabeth Magnoni used Quero na Escola as a way to finally get some use out of the reading room she had manage to create. “We had the reading room, but we were lacking the storytelling to [stimulate students] to read”.

The volunteer who sign up to read stories for students transformed her storytelling activities into something regular. “She lives two blocks away and loved [coming]. She had no idea what our school was like. And our school needs the community.”

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