

HARNESSING OR SQUANDERING POTENTIAL? AN ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

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A major yet often overlooked impediment to development in Brazil is the national public education system. Although Brazil is on track to meet the second and third Millennium Development Goals — the achievement of universal primary education and the elimination of gender inequality in primary and secondary education—numerous institutional, structural and cultural barriers remain which hinder development and growth. This paper will argue that Brazil's greatest challenge in educational policy relates not to quantity, but rather to the quality of education. Key systemic shortcomings that demand immediate attention include: administrative dysfunction, teaching deficiencies, low achievement and completion rates, and regional and racial discrimination. Impressive progress towards universalizing access has not been accompanied by quality improvements, causing high enrollment figures to deceptively suggest adequate attendance and achievement across the Brazilian population. After describing Brazil's historical, political and economic context, this paper will outline the various weaknesses of the Brazilian education system and offer policy recommendations that effectively reorganize the bureaucratic structure of public education, improve teacher training, raise student achievement rates and reduce discrimination. These recommendations will help Brazil escape the educational stagnation that is preventing it from maximizing its development potential.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Brazil has made significant progress towards achieving the second and third Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the attainment of universal primary education and the elimination of gender inequality in primary and secondary education. A variety of programs at the federal, state and municipal levels have been implemented to combat high levels of illiteracy and low levels of educational achievement (such as the Fazendo Escola and Fundef initiatives), primary enrollment in Brazil has grown from less than 80 percent in 1980 to nearly 97 percent in 2002, and gender inequality is virtually non-existent in the educational system (Thomas 2006). However, numerous institutional, structural and cultural barriers remain which impede development and growth. This report will argue that Brazil's greatest challenge in educational policy relates not to quantity, but rather to the quality of education. A plethora of systemic shortcomings, including administrative dysfunction, teaching deficiencies, low completion and achievement rates, and regional and racial inequality, result in educational stagnation across the country. After describing Brazil's historical, political and economic context, this paper will outline the various limitations of the Brazilian education system and offer policy recommendations in order to ensure that Brazil achieves its education MDGs in a meaningful and sustainable way.

BACKGROUND

Brazil has close to two hundred million inhabitants, making it the fifth most populous nation in the world. Colonized by Portugal over five hundred years ago, Brazil achieved independence in 1822 after three centuries of colonial rule. In the post-independence period, Brazil initially maintained a monarchical system of governance, but this was abolished in 1889 when the military proclaimed the formation of a republic. Throughout the twentieth century, Brazil experienced a significant amount of political turmoil, with more than fifty years of populist and military rule. In the 1930s, only a privileged few had access to formal education—it is estimated that only two in ten children attended school during this time period (The Brazil Institute 2007). Four years of education was typically the maximum for those that attended. Rural areas suffered severe deficiencies in educational infrastructure, as schools that included the 5th to 8th grades were only located in large cities. In the first half of the twentieth century, 60 percent of the adult population was illiterate (The Brazil Institute 2007). Enrollments grew at a rapid pace in the 1970s and 1990s, but the 1980s were characterized by stagnation at all educational levels. Although the military regime (1964-1985) constructed many new schools, access was still limited, and exclusivity remained an enduring feature of Brazil's education system. Signs of improvement began to show in the 1990s, when university enrollments doubled and average schooling for Brazilians above the age of 10 grew to 6.8 years (The Brazil Institute 2007).

Brazil has undergone a period of sustained economic growth in recent years because of increased productivity, a rising export market and high commodity prices. The average income in Brazil is US\$3,090, and Brazil is the largest economy in South America and the 14th largest in the world. If current economic growth rates are maintained, Brazil could rank alongside China, the United States, India and Japan as one of the five largest economies in the world by 2050 (Thomas 2006). However, this growth has not been distributed evenly across the country. Thirty-one percent of Brazil's population lives below the nation's defined poverty line (CIA World

Factbook 2010). One of the most visible manifestations of persistent poverty and inequality in Brazil is in the educational realm. The Brazilian government spends approximately 4 percent (roughly \$80 billion USD) of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education, which puts Brazil in the 105th position globally for federal expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP (CIA World Factbook 2010). This spending is not distributed evenly throughout the country—for instance, schools in the poorer Northeast region of Brazil receive far less government funding than schools in wealthier regions (Brazil Institute 2007). The current literacy rate, defined as the percentage of the population over the age of 15 that can read and write, is approximately 88.6 percent. The average 25-year old citizen has only completed nine years of formal education, indicating a low rate of secondary school completion in Brazil (Brazil Institute 2007). Although 97 percent enrollment in primary school has been achieved in Brazil, the figure stands at 32 percent for secondary school (Education for All Assessment 2000). Brazil also has the most absenteeism in Latin America, with over 500,000 children not in the classroom (Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009). Thus, despite Brazil's impressive economic growth, educational achievement still lags far behind.

SYSTEMIC SHORTCOMINGS

Brazil's educational policy problems can be divided into four broad categories: administrative dysfunction, teaching deficiencies, low completion and achievement rates, and regional and racial inequalities. Each of these deficiencies will be addressed in detail below.

ADMINISTRATIVE DYSFUNCTION

The most fundamental problem with education policy in Brazil is its administrative structure, which lacks clarity and consistency across the country. Currently, the structure of Brazil's education system is divided into four segments: pre-primary, basic, upper secondary and vocational. Pre-primary education includes day-care centers and pre-elementary schools and lasts from age two to six; basic education, which is compulsory, lasts from age seven to fourteen; upper secondary school is three years long and lasts from age fifteen to seventeen; and training courses in technical and vocational fields last from three to five years and typically occur from age fifteen to seventeen (World Higher Education Database 2010). Alternatively, students can enter higher education after secondary school, which is provided publicly at the federal, state, or municipal level. Private universities and independent institutions are also available. Higher education, which is free at public universities, is organized at two levels: undergraduate programs generally require four to six years of study, and graduate programs require two to six years of study.

The right of all Brazilian citizens to an education is enshrined in the 1988 Federal Constitution. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) is the federal body responsible for educational directives, but authority for schooling is highly decentralized. The Law of Directives and Bases of Education (LDB), which outlines the educational responsibilities of each level of government, came into force in 1996. According to the LDB, municipal governments must give

priority to offering primary education, state governments must offer secondary education, and the central government must give technical and financial support to both of these levels (Ministry of Education 2003). Under the 1988 Constitution, state and municipal governments must invest 25 percent of their revenues in education, while the federal government must invest 18 percent (The Brazil Institute 2007). It should be noted that Brazil receives a significant amount of funding from international sources for a variety of social programs. Although Brazil is less reliant on outside funding than other developing nations, the sheer size of the country and persistent income inequalities have necessitated the lending of large sums of money from international banks. Foreign loans from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank “are an important source of funds for projects aimed at improving the quality of education and at promoting more equity in the educational system” (Education for All Assessment 2000). Non-governmental organizations such as Ação Educativa and the Ayrton Senna Institute (IAS) also play an important role in carrying out nation-wide educational policies (Ibid). Brazil’s corporate sector has similarly collaborated with public authorities in many instances in an effort to improve the quality of education (Education for All Assessment 2000).

Currently municipalities are allowed to organize their school systems without state or federal interference (The Brazil Institute 2007). Owing to this relative independence there is little cooperation between states and municipalities with respect to priority-setting in education. Instead, competition is high between states and municipalities for talented students and resources (Guimarães de Castro 2007). Since the responsibility for primary schooling is divided between states and municipalities, the structure of basic education lacks organizational and operational coherence (Ibid). State and municipal schools do not share a common curriculum, which can adversely impact students who move from municipally-controlled primary schools to state-run secondary schools (Ibid). In recognition of these policy deficiencies, the Brazilian government introduced the Fundef program in 1996 to “consolidate responsibilities and jurisdictions among the three levels of government and.... define appropriate criteria for sharing funds earmarked for the educational system between states and municipalities, according to the number of students actually enrolled in the system” (Education for All Assessment 2000). More research is needed in order to accurately gauge whether or not this program, whose principal aim is to redistribute resources from wealthier to poorer regions, has been effective. Preliminary assessments reveal, however, that Fundef has raised wages for teachers and improved the academic performance of public school students (Menezes-Filho and Pazello 2004).

TEACHING DEFICIENCIES

Brazil’s education system is also permeated by poor quality teaching. Teacher absenteeism, chronic shortages, deficiencies in teacher training, low pay and a lack of incentives all play a role in the inadequate educational outcomes of Brazilian students. The National Education Council of Brazil estimates that there is currently a deficit of 280,000 science and mathematics teachers nation-wide (Guimarães de Castro 2007). A large number of teachers fail public examinations evaluating competence, and teacher pay is considered low when contrasted with salaries in other professions (Ibid). As public employees, teachers have a high degree of job stability irrespective of their job performance, which encourages apathy. Committed teachers who are frustrated by a

lack of upward mobility often leave the education sector to find higher-paying jobs in other fields (Ibid).

Another problem directly related to teaching deficiencies is the clientelistic nature of Brazilian politics and society. Although Brazil is institutionally democratic and inter-party competition has generally not been defined along ideological lines, the national political system still displays numerous shortcomings. The Brazilian government has traditionally “reflected the politics of charismatic leaders who acquire power and use it in a patronage (or clientelistic) system to maintain their standing in the government” (Birdsall et al 1996). Nepotism and favoritism have become culturally ingrained characteristics of virtually all fields of employment in Brazil, and the educational sector is no exception (Rezende 2009). The education system is the nation's largest employer and has long been a forum in which political favors are dealt. Today, approximately 60 percent of school principals are selected based on “political patronage criteria” (Guimarães de Castro 2007). Political appointees have proven in many instances to be “unqualified to manage complex organizations and huge budgets.... they fail in managing human resources and the scale of the administrative machinery” (Ibid). In addition, publishing firms have created textbook monopolies based solely on patronage and political connections (Corrales 2006). It is also not uncommon for state funding to be allocated based on the political allegiance of each respective governor rather than on the social and economic needs of a particular state (Ibid).

With respect to the curriculum taught in schools across the country, Fernando Haddad, Brazil's Minister of Education, has decried the ideological dogmatism that pervades Brazilian curricula in primary and secondary schools (Guimarães de Castro 2007). He recently claimed that:

One obvious problem is the dogmatism that reaches into our classrooms, excluding schools from [a] diversity of ideas and restricting them to the worldview of the Old Left. Visiting schools throughout Brazil in recent months, I observed that the main events of the 20th century, such as the two world wars and the fall of the Berlin wall, are absent from textbooks and classroom discussions. (Ibid, page 9).

In describing her vision for curricular improvement in Brazil, Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro, São Paulo's State Secretary of Education, has stressed that pupils should develop the basic values of sociability, respect for differences, ethics, solidarity, and teamwork in school—values which are currently not emphasized uniformly across Brazil (Guimarães de Castro 2007). Although classes that teach autonomy, social solidarity, teamwork, cultural diversity, human dignity, justice and ecology are present in some schools in Brazil, the lack of curriculum standardization across municipal and state lines has led to an unequal understanding and appreciation of these values amongst Brazilian students (Rezende 2009).

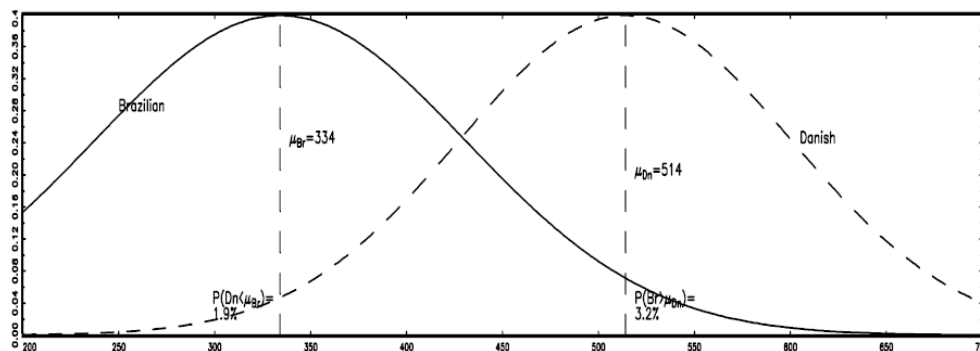
The National Education Plan, which was promulgated as law in 2001 by Brazil's National Congress and describes 26 priority goals to be achieved by 2011, addresses curricular values to be taught in Brazil's schools (Masagão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista 2005). The first priority—ensuring universal access to schools for all children aged seven to fourteen—is further broken down to include “efforts to ensure that all children complete the eight grades of primary

education, so as to provide them with the minimum schooling for exercising their citizenship rights and obligations, enjoying the cultural heritage of modern society and meeting job requirements” (Education for All Assessment 2000). The notion of the “formation of responsible citizens, aware of their rights” is a new development in an education system which has traditionally lacked any sort of uniform nation-wide curriculum (Ibid). This emphasis on education as a means to create responsible citizens aware of their unique cultural heritage reflects the desire of the Brazilian government to instill a sense of unity across Brazil’s heterogeneous population. Curriculum reform launched in 1995 by the Ministry of Education mandated the preservation and value of the native language and cultural traditions of indigenous Brazilians (Ibid). UNESCO is also working with Brazil to introduce African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture into nation-wide primary and secondary curricula in an attempt to promote ethnic-racial diversity (Brazil Ministry of Education and UNESCO 2009).

LOW COMPLETION AND ACHIEVEMENT RATES

Brazil’s increasing enrollment levels in primary and secondary education have deflected attention from the inadequate completion and achievement rates of students. In *A Millennium Learning Goal: Measuring Real Progress in Education*, authors Deon Filmer, Amer Hasan and Lant Pritchett argue that the MDG of universal primary education does not sufficiently address the quality of education and the competencies reached by students, rendering the MDG an ineffective measure of educational progress. In other words, completion of primary school is not necessarily synonymous with the goal of universal education. Although Brazil is widely cited to be on track to meet its educational MDGs, the quality of education is inadequate and leaves students ill-prepared to function in a globalized society. Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett estimate that 78 percent of Brazilian youth lack a minimally sufficient competency in mathematics. Overall, 96 percent do not reach an international standard of adequacy in this field (Filmer et al 2006). In comparison with achievement in Denmark—a nation widely recognized as having a high-quality education system—the median mathematics score taken from 2001 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data in Brazil are equal to the lowest scoring two percent of Danish students (see Figure 1) (Filmer et al 2006).

Figure 1.



Source: Filmer, Deon, Amer Hasan and Lant Pritchett. "A Millennium Learning Goal: Measuring Real Progress in Education." Center for Global Development Working Paper Number 97, August 2006.

While Brazil is expanding access to education, it is failing to meet a standard of quality necessary to fully equip its citizens with the skills and knowledge needed for “full participation as adults in economic, political and social roles” (Filmer et al 2006). With 55 million people in primary and secondary education, the sheer size of the educational system renders quality improvements an onerous policy challenge (The Brazil Institute 2007).

Table 1

Age Groups	Groups by Years in School				
	No Schooling and Less than 1 Year	1 to 3 years	4 to 7 years	8 to 10 years	No Data
15 to 19 years of age	674,818	2,036,784	6,843,837	6,459,017	205,772
20 to 24 years of age	765,048	1,870,618	4,777,302	3,465,184	148,543
25 to 29 years of age	811,508	1,793,256	4,433,993	2,433,540	120,361
30 to 39 years of age	1,960,297	3,765,116	8,025,980	4,051,353	217,996
40 to 49 years of age	2,160,463	3,446,993	6,130,141	2,480,914	155,098
50 to 59 years of age	2,506,484	2,895,555	3,713,002	1,070,596	116,538
60 years of age and over	5,026,007	3,508,312	3,645,889	829,134	142,170

Source: Ministry of Education of Brazil. “Nation Report on the Education of Young People and Adults.” International Mid-term Conference on Adult Education, 2003

Figure 2 – Dropout rates



Source: Filmer, Deon, Amer Hasan and Lant Pritchett. “A Millennium Learning Goal: Measuring Real Progress in Education.” Center for Global Development Working Paper Number 97, August 2006.

It is equally important to note that although enrollment ratios in Brazil are very high, actual completion rates are much lower. Table 1 shows the number of years spent in school by all cohorts above the age of 15 (Ministry of Education 2003). It is apparent from these estimates that large numbers of people are receiving insufficient levels of education. The pace of dropouts across the fundamental education cycle in Brazil (the first 9 years of education) is steady, as seen in Figure 2, and by grade 8, it is estimated that only 70 percent of Brazilian students are still in school (Filmer et al 2006). In the 1990s it was estimated that approximately 74 percent of children from the poorest quintile failed to complete Grade 4, and 90 percent of students from this quintile who enrolled in high school did not graduate (Bing 2008).

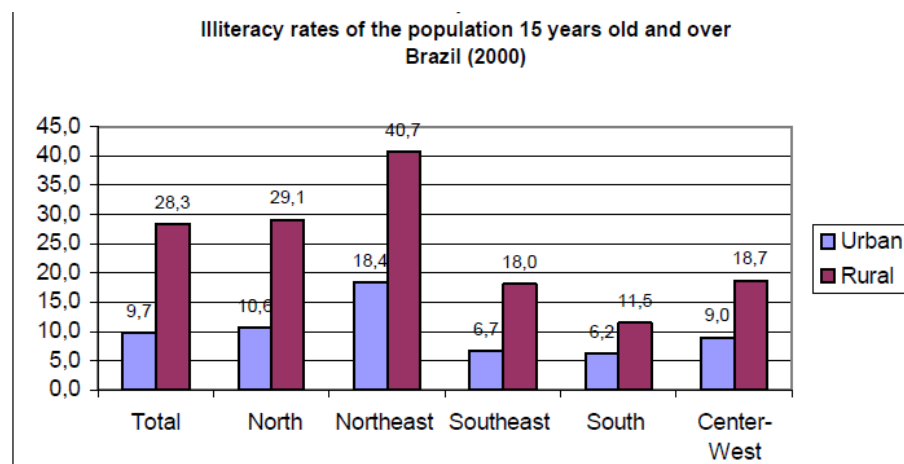
Although not directly related to the quality of the Brazilian education system, no discussion of educational shortcomings in this country would be complete without mentioning child labor. This phenomenon remains a significant impediment to the achievement of the Education MDGs in Brazil. In the 1990s, it was estimated that 27 percent of children aged 10 to 14 years old in the poorest quintile were working in some capacity (Bing 2008). Currently, seven million children work in Brazil (approximately 13 percent of children) despite laws banning child labor (Child Labor in Brazil 2003). A child's participation in the labor force during the first twelve years of his or her life has been found to reduce the number of completed years of education by almost three years in Brazil (Bing 2008).

Another problem plaguing the Brazilian education system is the high rate of grade repetition by students. Data from 2005 indicates that of ten year-old students, an estimated 34 percent had fallen behind at least one school year, and among fourteen year-olds, the figure reaches a staggering 55 percent (Guimarães de Castro 2007). The high rate of repetition by Brazilian students leads to tremendous cost inefficiencies. If the grade repetition rate were lowered, the Brazilian primary and secondary education system would have 25 percent more funding per student at its disposal, which could allow for teacher salary increases, capital improvements in schools, and generally more financial flexibility (Ibid). The World Bank estimates that a mere 1 percent decrease in grade repetition could lead to savings of close to USD \$240 million (Thomas 2006). Contributing to a high frequency of grade repetition is insufficient time spent in school, with the average school day lasting four hours. The national examination 'System for Evaluation of Basic Education' (SAEB), whose purpose is to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness, quality, and equity of the Brazilian basic education system, has consistently found that time spent in school is directly correlated with student success (The Brazil Institute 2007). Until Brazilian students spend longer periods of time in school every day, it is doubtful that educational achievement will increase by any substantial measure.

REGIONAL AND RACIAL INEQUALITIES

The final major problem facing the Brazilian Education System is inequality. High levels of illiteracy have plagued Brazil for centuries. Although substantial progress has been made in recent years, much remains to be done. There are an estimated 16 million Brazilians over the age of 15 who are unable to read and write (Ministry of Education 2003). The illiteracy level for white citizens is 7.7 percent, while this figure is approximately 16.6 percent for black citizens and 18.1 percent for indigenous Brazilians (Ibid). The illiteracy rate in the Northeast region of Brazil currently stands at 24.3 percent, which is twice the national average and more than three times the rate of illiteracy in the more prosperous South and Southeast regions (Ibid). Moreover, rural citizens as well as senior citizens display inadequate levels of literacy—in rural areas, 28.7 percent of people over the age of 15 are illiterate, as are 34 percent of Brazilians over the age of 60 (Ibid). Figure 3 demonstrates these geographical disparities and the urban-rural divide in Brazil as of 2000 (Masgão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista 2005).

Figure 3



Source: Masagão Ribeiro, Vera and Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista. “Commitments and Challenges towards a literate Brazil.”

It should be noted that the MEC is taking steps to mitigate the problem of racial discrimination across Brazil. In 2003, the MEC produced an educational kit entitled *Towards a Non-discriminatory Education for Young People and Adults* in conjunction with the ‘Network for the Defense of the Human Species’ (REDEH), a Brazilian non-governmental organization. This package includes a video, a collection of cassette tapes and manuals designed to help instructors teach tolerance and interracial understanding. Thus far, municipal and state school systems across the nation have received 1,200 of these kits (Ministry of Education 2003). With regards to combating illiteracy, the MEC created the Special Secretariat for Eradicating Illiteracy in 2003 and launched the Literate Brazil Programme (Ministry of Education 2003). Through formal agreements with states, municipalities and social organizations, this program aims to train over 55,000 literacy instructors to teach one million young people and adults to read and write. The Fazendo Escola program—in which the MEC provides technical and financial support to government and non-government organizations to combat illiteracy and low educational attainment—represents federal acknowledgement of the severity of Brazil’s illiteracy and low educational achievement rates (Ministry of Education 2003). Priority is given in this program to the North and Northeast regions, and state and municipal governments are transferred a per capita sum based on school enrollments in primary courses.

Historically, the private sector has been an important provider of education in Brazil. The past fifty years have seen a rapid expansion in both public and private schools, yet the growth of the public sector has been faster than that of the private sector (James et al 1996). Currently, 90 percent of students in basic education attend public schools in which no taxes or fees of any sort can be levied (Masagão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista 2005). Nevertheless, private schools have become an increasingly popular option for many Brazilian families. Parents’ perception of declining quality in public education has played a large role in explaining this rise. Across the country access to public school increased and enrollment numbers grew in the past thirty years because of proactive governmental policies. However, quality was sacrificed for quantity (James et al 1996). Additionally, socioeconomic inequalities are evident in the educational choices made by Brazilian families—wealthy parents have a tendency to enroll their children in private

primary and secondary schools, and benefit from government subsidies for high-quality public university education (Thomas 2006). Conversely, poorer students usually attend public primary and secondary schools which are of a lower quality than private schools, and if they are able to reach the post-secondary level, they more often than not go to low-quality but high-cost private universities (Thomas 2006). Table 2 shows the distribution of primary public and private schooling in Brazil in the period from 1995 until 2004 (Masagão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista 2005). Owing to substantial regional disparities of wealth in Brazil, the private sector is generally larger in states with high degrees of income polarization. Wealthy families are more likely to send their children to private schools in these regions (James et al 1996).

Table 2

**Evolution of initial enrollments in Youth and Adult Education – Primary Education
(Brazil, 1995 – 2004)**

Year	Total	Federal		State		Municipal		Private	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1998	2 081 710	561	0.2	1 316 533	63.2	629 659	30.2	134 957	6.5
2001	2 636 888	4 885	0.2	1 238 989	47.0	1267740	48.1	125 274	4.8
2002	2 788 113	2 733	0.1	1 098 825	39.4	1 587 905	57.0	98 650	3.5
2003	3 315 887	909	0.0	1 387 505	41.8	1 846 964	55.7	80 509	2.4
2004	3 419 170	381	0.1	1 354 303	39.6	1 987 723	58.1	76 763	2.2

Source: School Census 1998 - 2004 (INEP, 1999, 2003 and 2005)

Source: Masagão Ribeiro, Vera and Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista. "Commitments and Challenges towards a literate Brazil."

Table 3

Illiterates 15 years old and over by age groups and gender (Brazil: 2000)

Age groups	Total		Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
15 to 17 years	432005	4,03	287005	5,32	145000	2,72
18 to 24 years	1330327	5,69	837329	7,17	492998	4,22
25 to 29 years	1040647	7,52	618652	9,08	421994	6,00
30 to 34 years	1197781	9,19	670639	10,54	527142	7,91
35 to 39 years	1252178	10,21	668772	11,23	583406	9,25
40 to 49 years	2530022	13,13	1211179	12,98	1318843	13,26
50 to 59 years	2712735	21,68	1195679	19,93	1517056	23,29
60 to 69 years	2445134	29,85	1021698	26,98	1423437	32,32
70 years and over	2526433	39,80	1015297	37,05	1511136	41,89
Total	15467262	12,94	7526250	12,96	7941012	12,91

* It does not include those who did not inform their age.
Source: IBGE, Demographic Census 2000 (IBGE, 2003).

Source: Masagão Ribeiro, Vera and Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista. "Commitments and Challenges towards a literate Brazil."

Although Brazil is still struggling with issues of regional and racial discrimination, it is interesting to note that, unlike many other developing countries, gender discrimination in the educational realm is minimal. The MDG for gender equality in education is typically measured by the ratio of female to male enrollment in primary and secondary schools (Filmer et al 2006).

The World Development Indicators database indicates that as of 2003, the female to male primary enrollment ratio was 94.49 percent (World Development Indicators 2003). However, most indicators of gender disparity in Brazil are applicable only at the primary level. The World Bank reports a gender gap of 9.6 percent in primary gross enrollment rates in Brazil in favor of males, but this gap reverses at the secondary level, with the gross enrollment rates for males measuring approximately ten percent less than the female rate (World Bank EdStats 2007). Also, male illiteracy is slightly higher than female illiteracy, with the male rate at approximately 11.4 percent and the female rate at 11.1 percent (Ireland 2008). Figures vary from year to year, but as Table 3 demonstrates, the substantial gender gaps that exist with respect to literacy in many developing countries do not exist in Brazil (Masagão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista 2005). Overall, females report higher schooling rates, success rates, and average number of years of schooling (Education for All Assessment 2000). These statistics reveal that ethnic background and socioeconomic status are more important determinants of educational inequality than gender in Brazil. Indeed, the 2000 Education for All country assessment report for Brazil asserts that “gender discrimination has been eliminated” (Education for All Assessment 2000).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations should be implemented to address the four major problems outlined above:

Administrative dysfunction – The division of educational authority across federal, state and municipal boundaries has resulted in organizational dysfunction. An example is the lack of a uniform curriculum, which holds back students who transition from municipal to state-run schools. The MEC should adopt a standardized curriculum to be disseminated across all levels of schooling in Brazil. There should be no ambiguity for teachers in adopting the standards, although a degree of flexibility in teaching methods should be encouraged. Additionally, the problem of patronage must be addressed. The effectiveness of an education system depends in large part on the social and political context in which it is embedded. Administrative appointments need to be transparent, and selection for positions should be based on competence and a standardized certification process (Rodriguez et al 2008).

Teaching deficiencies – The poor quality of teaching in Brazil is one of the principal impediments to higher academic achievement amongst Brazilian students. Broadly speaking, teachers' salaries must be raised and career development must be focused on performance (Guimarães de Castro 2007). In order to attract high-quality teachers to rural areas, special pay incentives and benefits should be offered to those willing to teach in poverty-stricken regions. Greater numbers of teachers must be trained in order to address widespread shortages. Also, salary increases combined with opportunities for professional advancement should be implemented to encourage young Brazilians to enter the teaching profession. Punishments for teacher absenteeism should be strengthened as well. The current perception of teaching as a second-rate profession will only change if salaries rise and training is strengthened. To accomplish these goals, incentives and bonuses based on teaching competence as well as rigorous and transparent standards of teacher evaluation should be encouraged.

Low completion and achievement rates - One of the main obstacles to the completion of primary school is frequent grade repetition. Support systems must be put into place to recognize struggling students and offer remedial help in order to diminish the incidence of grade repetition. Class sizes must be reduced in order to give each student more individualized attention and the school day must be lengthened beyond the average of four hours, as the number of hours spent in school is positively correlated with academic success. Moreover, standardized assessment systems must be strengthened in order to accurately gauge which schools display the lowest academic achievement (Rodriguez et al 2008). State and municipal governments will then be able to strategically allocate resources based on test results.

Free meals provided in school have proven to be a significant incentive in increasing school attendance amongst children from impoverished families. The improved health outcomes in poor children that result from better nutrition will help combat low levels of academic achievement. Thus, programs such as the National School Meal Program (PNAE), which uses federal funds to provide at least one meal per day to students in elementary schools and pre-school programs, should be expanded (Education for All Assessment 2000). In an effort that recognizes the importance of proper nutrition the Brazilian government has nearly doubled its investment in school lunches since 1995 and this trend should continue (Corrales 2006).

Regional and racial inequalities – For any educational policy to be effective in Brazil, it must address and eradicate the persistent problem of child labor, which is a function of regional and racial inequalities. Various data from the World Bank demonstrate that policies that “delay the age of entry into the labor market will significantly reduce adult poverty incidence through the indirect effect of increasing years of schooling” (Bing 2008). The Bolsa Escola program offers educational subsidies to low-income families in an attempt to reduce inequality and child labor (Corrales 2006). This program is premised on the concept of conditional cash transfers (CCTs), which are small sums of money awarded to poor families on the basis of a minimum school attendance of 90 percent of the required hours (Bing 2008). This strategy of positive inducement to attend school has proven to be very successful in Brazil, as it offsets the opportunity cost calculation that many families have to make by awarding grants “of at least as much income as potential child labor income” (Ibid). This program, launched in 1995, should be expanded in the most impoverished regions of Brazil in order to combat persistent inequalities and level the educational playing field.

CONCLUSION

Brazil should be lauded for the significant progress it has made over the last few decades in expanding access to primary and secondary education. However, in order to achieve the education MDGs in a sustainable way, shortcomings in the *quality* of the education system must be immediately addressed. This paper has argued that quality limitations in the Brazilian education system can be broadly subsumed under four categories: administrative dysfunction, teaching deficiencies, low completion and achievement rates, and regional and racial inequality. Brazilian politicians and policy makers have begun demonstrating their recognition of these problems by implementing a variety of programs such as nation-wide literacy initiatives and needs-based resource allocation schemes. They should go one step further and work towards

effectively reorganizing the bureaucratic structure of the education system, improving teacher training, raising achievement rates and quelling discrimination. Brazil must achieve these goals to harness its full development potential and to provide a sustainable public education system to its citizens.

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