

Still a lot to learn

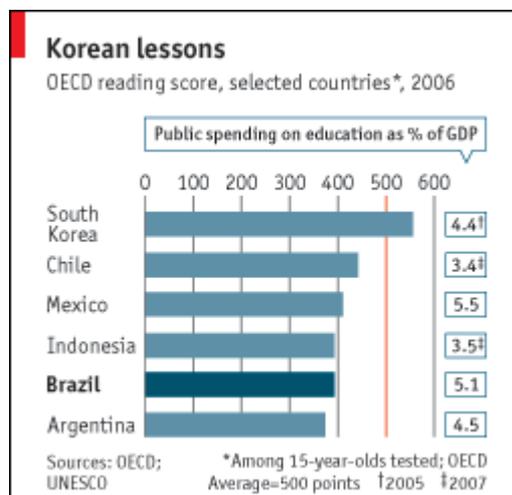
Brazil's woeful schools, more than perhaps anything else, are what hold it back. They are improving—but too slowly.



Agencia Estado

GOD may be Brazilian, as citizens of South America's largest country like to say, but he surely played no part in designing its education system. Brazil has much going for it these days—stable politics, an open and fairly harmonious society, an economy that has remembered how to grow after decades of stagnation—but when it comes to the quality of schools, it falls far short even of many other developing countries despite heavy public spending on education.

In the OECD's worldwide tests of pupils' abilities in reading, maths and science, Brazil is near the bottom of the class (see chart). Until the 1970s South Korea was about as prosperous as Brazil but, helped by its superior school system, it has leapt ahead and now has around four times the national income per head. World domination, even the friendly and non-confrontational sort Brazil seeks, will not come to a place where 45% of the heads of poor families have less than a year's schooling.



Moisés Zacarias, who is 14, goes to school in Diadema, a poor suburb of São Paulo that sprang up when millions of people migrated from the countryside to the country's biggest metropolis, starting in the 1960s. Most of the houses are thrown together, clinging to steep hills and set along narrow alleys. At his school, which has 2,000 pupils, there are three separate shifts of students every day to get the most out of the buildings and teachers. Last year some pupils beat up others during a lesson and posted a video of the attack on the internet. Teachers often fail to show up for work. But Moisés's school is better than it was five years ago.

Brazil began its education late. When the country was a Portuguese colony even the elite had little access to education at home. The first printing press did not arrive until the 19th century, hundreds of years after books were first printed in the region's Spanish-speaking countries. Before then presses were illegal. In 1930 just one in five children went to school. When Brazil did decide to build a nationwide education system, the wants of the elite came first. As in India, Brazil still spends a lot on its universities rather than on teaching children to read and write.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva came to power criticising his predecessor's achievements and promising rapid improvements. In fact, his successes have largely come from continuing and expanding the initiatives he inherited. He renamed and enlarged Fundef, the previous government's programme to supplement local funding for teachers' pay and schools in poor districts. Cash transfers to poor families, conditional on their children attending school, became more generous and were rolled together with other programmes under the brand name Bolsa Família. After two bad appointments, the president picked a good education minister, Fernando Haddad, who enjoys the backing of educational reformers.

Thanks to these programmes 97% of children aged 7-14 now have access to schooling and attendance is good. Yet the federal government can do only so much in a country with around 50m in education. The task of improving schooling falls to state and municipal governments. They face many problems, but two stand out.

First, Brazil suffers from teacher truancy. Teachers enjoy a "right" to five days' absence a year with no warning or explanation, but some take many more. In schools run by state governments, 13% of all school days were lost owing to absent teachers in 2006. On a bad day in bad schools in bad states, teachers' absenteeism can reach 30%. There are meant to be substitutes who can fill in for missing colleagues but this means that teaching lacks continuity—and there may not be enough stand-ins to go around.

Second, too many pupils repeat whole school years over and over. And after a long time spent getting nowhere, lots of children drop out early. Just 42% complete high school. Improving the quality of schools so that more children pass would lead to a marked increase in the amount of money available for each pupil. To accomplish this Brazil needs qualified teachers, who are in short supply. Many have two or three different jobs in different schools and complain that conditions are intimidating and the pay is low.

In São Paulo, which does particularly badly for a rich state, the institutions that administer education are depressed and chaotic, says Norman Gall of the Braudel Institute of World Economics, a think-tank that runs reading circles in ten schools in poor urban districts. The São Paulo state bureaucracy tries to administer its 5,000 schools and 230,000 teachers with a thin staff on low pay. Transferring responsibility for schools to municipalities seems to help, and this has been happening across the country in recent decades.

As elsewhere, teachers' unions present a huge obstacle to improvement. Almost anything that disturbs their peace brings on strikes. At the moment São Paulo's teachers are striking over a proposal to make new recruits take tests before they start work to ensure they are qualified;

last year they were up in arms when the state government asked them to teach from standard textbooks. They opposed a plan to pay staff bonuses depending on their schools' performance but have gone quiet on this since 70% of the state's teachers received a bonus a few months ago.

Doing a little better

Not everywhere is as bad as São Paulo, and even there you can see some signs of improvement. The state has cut the number of teaching days lost to supposed ill-health (the biggest cause of no-shows) by 60% in a year after changing the law. Reforms in the state could spread across the country if its governor, José Serra, becomes Brazil's next president in the 2010 election, as opinion polls suggest.

In Brazil's north-east, hardly associated with enlightened public policy, a network of schools called Procentro and run by professional managers rather than unsackable political hacks, is proving successful and expanding. In other places state governments have shown a willingness to work with the private sector to improve schools. Across the country, money follows pupils to schools and children are tested—two of the ingredients for a market in public education.

At Moisés's school in Diadema a new head teacher has instilled some discipline and classes are now a bit more orderly. Jonathan Hannay, who runs Support for Children at Risk, a local charity, and has four children in public schools in the area, says things have improved in the past year, if only because teachers and pupils now work from matching sets of teaching manuals and exercise books. Such small changes can make a difference. But, if it is ever to live up to its potential, Brazil needs to keep reforming its schools, bearing down on the teaching unions and spending more on basic education.

STILL a lot to learn. **The Economist**, New York, June 4th, 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 8 jun. 2009.

A utilização deste artigo é gratuita e exclusiva do Portal de Políticas Públicas