

HOW TO IMPROVE EDUCATION QUALITY

Education in Brazil has advanced in terms of school access, but its quality is still questionable. That calls not just for more and better investments in education but perhaps also for reformulation of the entire educational system.

Kalinka Iaquinto

IT IS NOT NEWS THAT EDUCATION is considered the foundation for development of people, societies, economies, and nations. Yet only recently have Brazilians made it a priority. A 2014 survey by the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), in partnership with IBOPE Intelligence, found that better-quality education had moved up from seventh position in 2007 to third in terms of what Brazilians are concerned about, jumping above health and combating violence and crime.

In the postwar period, Brazil sought industrialization at the expense of education, but today more Brazilians realize the benefits of an educated workforce in terms of higher and more widely distributed incomes. Yet despite the progress in access to education, labor productivity remains stagnant. The question is why.

The answer is that despite broader

access, the quality of education is very poor. There is an urgent need not just to invest more resources in education—a controversial point— but also to improve its management and accountability, monitor it better, make it more responsive to labor market demand, and develop and adopt new technologies .

Education and productivity

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) points out that in the last decade, half the growth in developed countries was due to better workforce training. And the relationship holds even beyond the older developed countries. “Long before us, South Korea recognized the importance of education. Even Argentina, despite repeated economic policy blunders, had greater productivity than we have,” says Samuel Pessôa, associate researcher, the Brazilian Institute of Economics (IBRE). Nelson de Cheri Karam, director of the School of Labor Science at the Trade Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (Dieese), adds that, “Education alone may not ensure that workers will have jobs or better pay, but it is an important necessary condition.”

The U.S. Conference Board noted that in 2013 average earnings for Brazilians was US\$10.80 an hour, the lowest among Latin American

countries (compare US\$20.80 in Chile; US\$16.80 in Mexico, and US\$13.90 in Argentina). “It takes three Brazilian workers to produce as much as one South Korean, four as much as one German, and five as much as one American. We have very clear productivity deficiencies we must address,” says Rafael Lucchesi, director general of the National Service of Industrial Learning (SENAI) and director of Education and Technology of National Confederation of Industry (CNI). He considers the Brazilian educational system today to be too academic and believes it is not providing enough technical training.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) productivity ranking for 2013–14 put Brazil at 56th among 148 countries, behind Chile (34th), Panama (40th), Costa Rica (54th) and Mexico (55th). At the top were Switzerland, Singapore, Finland, Germany, and the United States. The WEF blames the low position of nations like Brazil on an insufficient degree of competition and gaps in terms of education and training, technology, and innovation that prevent many companies from moving up to higher-value-added activities. A 2013 CNI study found that in 2011, 67% of mining and manufacturing companies were having problems hiring skilled professionals. Two years later that was still true of 65%. The great problem is finding machine operators (90%) and technicians (80%).

To reach even half of US productivity Brazil would have to increase productivity growth from the current 1% to about 2–2.5%. Pessôa thinks that will take 40 years.

High schools and vocational training

Change is possible, but it calls for concrete action at every level from basic to higher education. The 2013 Census of Basic Education found that in 2012 Brazil had raised enrollment in daycare and preschool, reduced the number of failing students in elementary and middle schools, and cut the number of dropouts to 2.7%, half the number in 2007. On the other hand, education quality had

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not improved much, particularly in high school, the bridge between young people and the labor market. In 2013 enrollment in high schools was the lowest since 2007—8.3 million (1% lower than in 2012). There are still 1.5 million youths aged 15–17 years not in school. But “the problem of high schools is not just a Brazilian problem,” adds Daniel Cara, general coordinator of the National Campaign for the Right to Education. He explained that since in all nations high school is the end of formal studies for most people; it should provide skills and training for them to make a decent living.

Brazil: Education numbers

50,545,050

students enrolled
in basic education

447,463

students enrolled in the
Pronatec in 2011 up from
318,404 in 2008

Sources: Ministry of Education and government statistics agency IBGE.

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According to Marcelo Neri, Minister of the Strategic Affairs Secretariat (SAE) of the Presidency, surveys by the Getulio Vargas Foundation show a change in the public mindset in relation to education. He stresses the need to involve more young people in the process of change: “When you ask someone 15 to 17 years old why he is not in school, over 40% reply that they have no interest,” he says, adding that reaching the students is the great challenge because at 51 million they

constitute the largest share of Brazil’s population they have ever had.

Today, only 85% of Brazilians between 15 and 17 are enrolled in school, and only 50% of those are in the appropriate grade. “To be able to use today’s information and communication technologies effectively, you need to at least have high school,” says IBRE researcher Fernando Veloso, who advocates a curriculum model that is less binding and offers more electives—because modern jobs require flexibility.

Outdated curricula

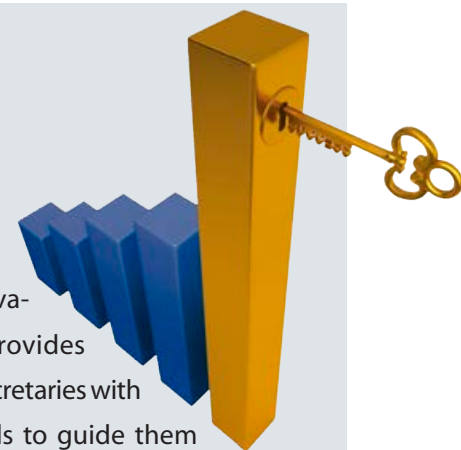
Veloso believes that curricular changes are central if the country is to create and absorb technology. SENAI’s Lucchesi warns, “We need to be bolder. We cannot have a school of the 19th century, with teachers of the 20th century, if we are to interest students of the 21st century.”

Planning: The foundation for good management

The consensus is that regardless of the resources made available for education, good management is essential to make progress. And good management requires planning. “The main problem in Brazil, especially in education, is that we do not have a culture of planning,” says João de Monlevade, consultant ant to the Federal Senate. Carlos Sanches, former president of the National Union of Municipal Education, agrees: “Before knowing how much money we will have and how much we will be able to spend, we need planning. As long as there is efficient planning, there will be efficient and effective spending.”

Seeking to address this problem at the local level, several organizations have come together to

create an electronic platform, Conviva Educação (www.conviva-educacao.org.br). It provides municipal education secretaries with free management tools to guide them in everything from budgeting and human resources management to planning such specifics as school meals. “The Conviva provides training and self-instructional content—tools that often municipalities do not have access to,” says Maira Moraes, project manager for the Natura Institute, one of the partners in the initiative. About 3,000 of the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities participate. .



Vocational technical education, experts agree, should be greatly expanded. Building on the technical schools established in recent decades, the federal government in 2011 launched the National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment (Pronatec) to expand access to vocational training. The first phase invested US\$6.4 billion and by year-end 8 million students should be enrolled. The second phase will provide 12 million places in technical schools between 2015 and 2018.

But Pronatec has some challenges. “The problem of technical education is to identify where the world and the labor market are going,” says IBRE researcher Fernando de Holanda Barbosa Filho. In other words, the skills taught in high school should be those the economy is demanding. “Today, we have almost no idea whether regions, states, or the country itself offer the courses the labor market requires. This is a serious gap,” says Dieese’s Karam. Veloso concludes that “Today we need much more basic skills to know how to apply knowledge in practice and learn to solve problems and interpret texts. These are points on which our students are very weak.”

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Basic education

High school education can only build on foundations laid in basic education, which depend on the quality of primary and middle school teaching. Simon Schwartzman, president, Institute for Work and Society Studies, pointed out that teachers need better training and pay. Although in 2008 the National Salary Floor for Teachers Law was approved, many states and municipalities do not comply with it because they lack resources. “We have made progress regarding college teachers, but especially in the final years of middle and high school very few teachers are licensed,”

Improving school governance

In Pinheiral county in Rio de Janeiro state, which has about 25,000 inhabitants, to create closer ties between public schools and the community the Department of Education has created both 12-member School Councils that have representatives from faculty, students, and the public, and separate Student Councils.

“Since last year, we have been working to raise awareness and train principals and councilors so the community can participate in school affairs,” said municipal secretary Maria Helena dos Santos.

She explained that the councils will help the department to craft pedagogical proposals that meet local needs.

The Student Councils participate in the day-to-day decisions of the school and “all schools now have student representatives who meet monthly with a city hall representative to discuss issues of their interest and coordinate what is done with other city departments,” Santos said. She noted that the municipality is also addressing the drug problem to prevent truancy.

says Alejandra Meraz Velasco, technical manager of the NGO Education for All.

According to the OECD, less than half of primary school teachers in Brazil work in just one institution, and only 40% of Brazilian teachers in early education have full-time positions, against an international average of 82%. In Brazil, more than 90% of lower secondary teachers had completed higher education, but nearly 25% had not completed a teacher-education program; the world average is 90%. “For a child to remain in school there must be quality, and for this the teacher needs training, compensation and appreciation,” says Carlos Sanchez, deputy director of the National Campaign for the Right to Education.

More resources?

The new National Education Plan (PNE) commits the government to investing 10% of GDP in education in the next 10 years. IBRE’s Barbosa Filho is critical: “The school-age population in coming years will fall so the average expenditure per student will naturally increase. Furthermore, several studies show that student learning is not related to the amount spent per student. ... The problem of education is management, not lack of money.”

SENAI’s Lucchesi agrees. He points out that “Brazil already spends more than 6% of GDP in education—about the same average as OECD countries. This demonstrates that we have a management challenge.”

Carlos Sanches, former president of the National Union of Municipal Education Managers, does not agree: “Every US\$1 invested in education increases GDP by US\$0.87. ... Of all the variables that can affect GDP, investment in education has the greatest impact.” He also stresses that the right to education is in the Federal Constitution—“It is a basic right fundamental for life and human dignity.”

This opinion is challenged by IBRE’s Pessôa: “Today, the government already spends an adequate amount. South Korea has never committed more

than 5% of GDP even when it was poorer than we are.” Veloso adds that “We should focus less on the spending on education and more on its effectiveness.” Velasco notes that “In fact Brazil is investing the same share of GDP as OECD countries, but its spending per student is only a fifth of, for example, the US.”

Accountability matters

The experts agree that more resources alone will not be enough to change education in Brazil. As Schwartzman says, “More money should be given very carefully and associated with very clear programs and targets and assessments of outcomes.”

In the report *The Learning Curve*, written by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Brazil, ranked 38th, is among emerging economies, such as Argentina and Mexico, that have increased funding for education but recorded a fall in school performance and cognitive abilities.

Education in Brazil is largely provided by states and municipalities. The federal government is directly responsible only for certain public universities, but Veloso explains that it does provide some resources and set national educational standards. It is therefore essential to find ways to get local governments to carry out their duties efficiently. And Daniel Cara believes the responsibilities of governments at all levels need to be rethought. He spells it out this way: “Today, for every US\$1 invested in education, the federal government provides US\$0.18, states US\$0.40, and municipalities US\$0.42. Municipalities, which collect the least, have to make the most effort. Establishing a standard cost per student would mean education funding would be shared more equally among federal government, states, and municipalities.” This would require the federal government to transfer an additional US\$20 billion annually to states and municipalities to begin to ensure quality education for all Brazilians. ▣