Can Brazilians be educated out of POVERTY?

Solange Monteiro

OF ALL THE POLICIES to ensure inclusive growth in Brazil, improvement in education is the most essential. The increase in school enrollment that occurred in the last two decades has already brought significant gains for the Brazilian economy. Fernando de Holanda Barbosa Filho and Rodrigo Leandro de Moura, Brazilian Institute of Economics researchers, estimate that between 2002 and 2012 workers being more educated reduced informal work by 45%.

However, the country has failed to keep on improving education. According to Leandro de Moura, "From 1990 to 2000, schooling of the population grew 42% to 6.4 years of study; from 2000 to 2010, years of schooling rose only by 17%, to 7.5 years."

Ricardo Paes de Barros, undersecretary of strategic affairs for the Presidency, says the lack of motivation to gain more education has many aspects; for example, recently it has been more difficult for the poor to find jobs. Today, less-educated people face a very different job market than in the last decade, when they had above-average income increases.

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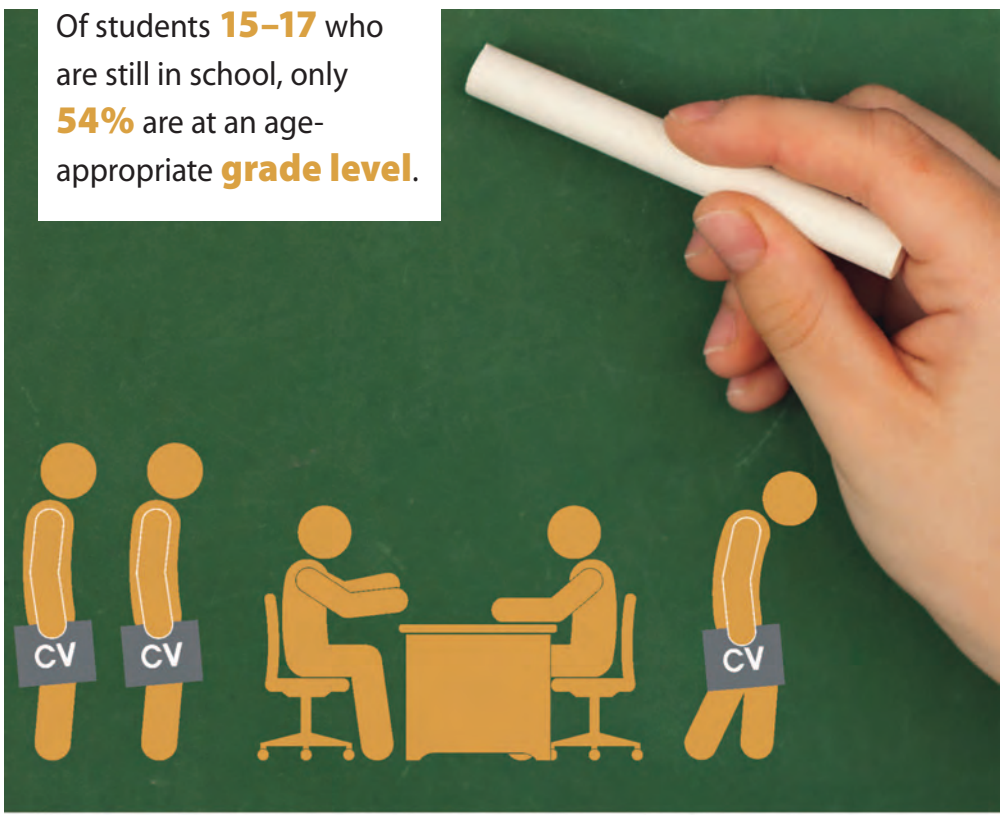

From 2001 to 2011, wages of unskilled workers grew by about 40%, compared to 15% for the average-skilled and 5% for the highly-skilled. "Today," he says, "the Brazilian job market is not able to absorb workers with little education."

The greatest challenge is to overcome functional illiteracy, which affects about 18% of the population and is considered one of the reasons that young low-income adults drop their studies. Raquel Alvez Pereira, supervisor of CETEP Ipanema, a technical school maintained by the Rio de Janeiro Department of Science and Technology, is thoroughly familiar with the problem. CETEP offers free continuing education courses in IT networks, languages for tourism services, and administrative assistance. Initially it was targeted to about 11,000 residents of low-income areas, but "enrollment of this population has been no more than 30%," Pereira says; the others enrolling are people who work near the school. However, "though enrollment often surpasses the 2,500 spaces we have available, only 1,500 at most actually complete a course," she says. Along the way many students stumble on their own lack of preparation and quit. Pereira points out that "It is difficult, for example, to explain the use of an Excel spreadsheet to those who have difficulty with the four basic math operations." The school does have classes in Portuguese and math for students who need them.



Rio de Janeiro
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In Brazil, **85%** of the richest students finish high school but only **28%** of the poorest, for a national average of **58%**.



Squandered bonus

School dropout is even more worrying when those dropping out are younger, 15–17 years. In this age group, school dropouts reach 20%—1.5 million youngsters. "For any country that aspires to be developed in the near future, this age group should be studying like crazy,

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Ricardo Paes de Barros

full-time," says Paes de Barros. He believes the country is at risk of wasting its demographic bonus. Between 2003 and 2023, he estimates, the share of Brazilians aged 15–29 years will be at its peak of about 50 million. "Due to dropouts, Brazil will have the largest workforce of all time with an educational deficit that is difficult to fix; this will create a group of adults who may not be incorporated into the modern economy. This is very serious." The National Education Plan (PNE) set the goal of 100% school attendance for this age group by 2016, which now seems a Herculean challenge.

There are other education deficiencies. Of students 15–17 who are still in school, only 54% are at an age-appropriate grade level. The PNE goal is for 85% to be at an age-appropriate level by 2024. At 3.7 in 2013 the Index of Basic Education Development (IDEB) had not budged since 2011;

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the Ministry of Education target was 3.9 (out of a high of 10). Furthermore, an Inter-American Development Bank study published in June revealed that, in Brazil, 85% of the richest students finish high school but only 28% of the poorest, for a national average of 58%.

"The Brazilian educational goal—which we are not meeting—is to reach the level of OECD countries with a 15-year delay," Paes de Barros says. "We already have in several cities schools in underprivileged communities that meet the current goal of the OECD, in which students attend school at age-appropriate grade levels. That means we know how to do it. We just need to know how to disseminate best practices and create appropriate incentives."

Joining forces

Alejandra Velasco, general coordinator of the movement All for Education, says, "We should begin [by improving] the quality of basic education, which currently frustrates students and leads them to dislike school." She points out that basic education was the center of attention in Sobral city in Ceará state, where half the population is poor. The city carried out an illiteracy eradication program based on assessment of student performance, teachers' training, and incentives to teachers to meet set goals. It has already achieved the 2021 IDEB goal of 6.1 points. Ceará state provides Sobral with resources to pay bonuses to the best-performing teachers. In 2007, the Sobral program was extended to all of Ceará state. It has also inspired the creation of a federal program, National Literacy at the Proper Age.

Fernando Veloso, IBRE researcher, underscores the importance in successful cases of coordinating efforts at different levels of government to improve management. "This is particularly important in the case of small municipalities that cannot obtain resources because they are not able to develop high-quality educational projects," he says.

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Raquel Alvez Pereira

Velasco advocates a system of transfers and subsidies for schools and teachers in poor areas. "Since more remote schools generally do not have enough equipment or a decent library, they are unlikely to attract the best teachers. In the end, those who accept the positions are generally younger teachers with little experience, who are already thinking about a future transfer," she says.

Experts support the expansion of vocational education in high schools —Brazil accounts for less than half of the vocational enrollment of Chile —as well as more flexible curricula. "Today high school education is too rigid," Veloso says. "In successful countries there is a broader offering of subjects to accommodate a variety of interests and attract the attention of the young."

Velasco points out, however, that decisions need to be made faster, noting that "The National Education Plan took about four years to be approved." Paes de Barros agrees: "We are far behind. We must do everything possible to accelerate progress in education."