

Discussion

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AS A CONSTRAINT ON ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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Brazil offers an intriguing case where education is not related to development. Between 1900 and 1975, Brazil had the second highest rate of growth in the world, second only to Japan, though rates have slowed since then. Brazil also had one of the worst income distributions in the world. Only a few small African countries had a more unequal distribution than we did. In 1960, Brazil had an illiteracy rate of 40 percent, and 40 percent of our children between the ages of 7 and 14 were not in school, suggesting that development, or growth at least, was not related to education, though income distribution probably was.

The situation was still very difficult in 1994, when I took charge of the Ministry of Education. I have been in the position for seven and a half years, but I am an economist by training. I became involved in education administration in 1984 when I was appointed Secretary of Education of the state of San Paolo, which is the largest state in the country with the largest system of education. I was appointed because I taught labor economics, and there was a huge teachers' strike. I was hired to end the strike and to resolve the labor problems. After that, I remained in education as President of the State University of Campinas. Then I was Operations Manager at the Inter-American Development Bank for four years, but returned as the Minister of Education.

Brazil has a huge educational system. We have 60 million students in the entire system. Almost one-third, or 30 percent, of our population is attending some kind of school. But even in 1994 we still had only 87 percent of our children between the ages of 7 and 14 attending school; about 13 percent were not in school, meaning that, by the end of the

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twentieth century, we still did not have universal access to elementary education, which the United States had by the end of the nineteenth century.

At that time, 25 percent of the children in the northeast of Brazil, which is the poorest area of the country, were not in school. Nationwide, 25 percent of the children in the lowest income quintile were not in school. Twenty percent of black children were not in school. The illiteracy rate for those aged 15 to 19 years was 6.8 percent nationwide. But in the northeast it was 16 percent. And 17 percent of the population aged 15 and over was illiterate. Just 50 percent of those who began primary school finished it. And the average time taken to complete the eight years of primary school was 12 years, because so many children failed their yearend exams and had to repeat grades. Extensive grade repetition does not occur in the United States or in England, but in Brazil, and in Latin America in general, it is a huge problem.

Because of grade repetition, at the end of elementary school, having spent 12 years in school already, most children went into the labor market instead of continuing on to high school. As a result, any given member of the Brazilian workforce had an average of only 5.3 years of schooling. The proportion of each cohort that attended high school or university was half that of neighboring countries like Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, and nowhere near that of the United States or Europe. However, we had the best higher-education system in Latin America, with high quality especially in the public universities and with quite a diversified and sophisticated system of research and graduate studies. Our education system had huge contrasts then.

This model of education was compatible with the development Brazil experienced. There were plentiful natural resources and cheap, unskilled labor. At the same time, Brazil was also able to make some very important contributions to technology in the production of oil, in communications, and in agriculture. Some areas of educational excellence were essential to develop such technologies.

Of course, the world has changed. We are now living in the age of knowledge. We are living in a new technological revolution. This new society makes some new demands on our educational system. Today it is necessary to learn how to learn. It is no longer acceptable to concentrate education in just one period of our lives. To exercise citizenship in any aspect, it is necessary to keep learning our whole lives.

Developing the ability to learn has become the primary goal of education. It is necessary to universalize access to basic education, including preschool, elementary school, and secondary school, and it is no longer useful to think in terms of the transmission of knowledge. Rather, basic education should develop the ability to reason, to learn, to understand, and to criticize. This distinction is important because instead

of thinking about years of schooling, we have to think about the content of our basic education in a way that is different from the past.

On the other end, we also have to offer more opportunities for lifelong education, which means increasing vocational training, expanding higher education, encouraging the introduction of new teaching technologies and distance education, and making the structure of secondary education more flexible, in order to permit more frequent entry and exit from the system. These were the challenges, on top of the problem of providing more universal access, that confronted our system in 1994.

I am not going to discuss the main policies we developed,¹ but I would like to point out some recent results. Between 1994 and 2000, we were able to increase the overall enrollment rate in elementary schools from 87 percent to 96.3 percent. We estimate that enrollment is now around 97 percent. We dramatically reduced the difference in enrollment rates across income quintiles: Between 1992 and 1999, the enrollment rate in the lowest quintile increased from 75 percent to 93 percent, approaching the highest quintile's rate of 99 percent. Differences between races have also diminished: Indigenous enrollment rose from 77 percent to 87 percent, and black enrollment rose from 79 percent to 93 percent.

We also reduced grade-repetition rates. The enrollment level in elementary schools grew by only 11 percent in this period, despite the fact that the enrollment rate among children considered to be of elementary-school age grew from 87 percent to 97 percent, and despite the fact that the size of this age group increased. This is because we substantially improved grade-to-grade approval rates and reduced repetition rates. Between 1994 and 2000, completions at elementary schools grew by 67 percent. Enrollment in high schools rose 71 percent and completions 102 percent. In these six years, total university enrollment grew by 62 percent, indicating that, with a big effort and a huge fiscal reform, we are now catching up.

With a strong decentralization policy and with community participation in the administration of the system and in the schools themselves, we are now in a position to face the challenge of having education enhance development and reduce disparity in Brazil. Of course, we still have to continue to keep an eye on improving quality. Overall, the Brazilian experience offers an interesting contrast to the situation in the United States.

¹ For more information see Paulo Renato Souza, *Education and Development in Brazil*, Ministry of Education: October 2000.