Education 3: Why so little teaching and learning?

Managing Public Education in São Paulo

Jane Wreford
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(Jane Wreford)  
“In recent years public education authorities in Brazil have struggled …”

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“The outsider’s eye does not always see things the same way as our own. Hence …”
Editor’s note: Big-city schools throughout the world are in trouble. Failure to learn is a common problem among poor urban children. Reforms have been frustrated by education bureaucracies, teachers’ unions, disagreement over strategies and erratic leadership and funding. A study by the Brookings Institution in Washington argued that “policy churn and leadership turnover confound even the most highly-regarded efforts to institutionalize reform efforts,” adding that “urban school performance is so miserable that no one can be justified in encouraging delay in addressing the problems of school quality until the solutions to all other youth and family problems were in hand.” São Paulo is a special problem because of political indifference, the challenge of managing such a huge and disorderly school system and the long-term social and economic consequences of failure to learn. The Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics asked Jane Wreford of British Audit Commission to investigate these problems.

In recent years public education authorities in Brazil have struggled successfully to enroll nearly all children in schools. The next challenge, more visible and immediate in big cities, is to achieve quality of education. Greater São Paulo, a metropolis of 18 million people, has absorbed huge flows of migration and struggles with problems of scale. Among the 39 municipalities forming Greater São Paulo, 4.1 million pupils attend primary and secondary schools. Less than 14% of them are in private schools, a share that has fallen fast in recent years as building of public schools in the periphery expanded enormously, in parallel and often overlapping state and municipal systems. The state government, with sole responsibility for public secondary education, also absorbs two-thirds of primary enrollments and runs schools in the metropolis for three million pupils, totaling nearly half the enrollment in a statewide system of 6.1 million students and 250,000 employees. All children can attend school, at least until the age of 16, and most in São Paulo now do. That is a big achievement.

With some notable exceptions, the quality of Brazilian public schooling is low by comparison with the developed world. Brazil’s pupils ranked last among 15-year-olds in 32 countries tested for reading comprehension in 2000 by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Education Ministry’s National System for Evaluating Primary Education (SAEB) found no gains in pupil learning since 1991. Of every 100 Brazilian pupils who begin the eight years of primary school, only 59 finish.

In a new study, A escola vista por dentro (The School Seen from Inside), João Batista Araujo e Oliveira and Simon Schwartzman described “normal” practice in a large sample of Brazilian schools. It is normal not to complete the school year; it is normal for a class to lose 30% or 40% by dropouts or academic failure; it is normal to promote pupils unable to acquire enough knowledge to continue their studies; it is normal to group pupils in classes where they are unable to follow the lessons; it is normal to give homework requiring help from parents, knowing that parents cannot help; it is normal to begin the school year without teachers assigned to classrooms; it is normal to appoint teachers unequipped to teach, without elementary knowledge of Portuguese or arithmetic; it is normal to operate schools without pedagogical coordination, libraries or books in the libraries; it is normal to blame children and parents for pupils’ failure.

Improving public education faces many obstacles. However, we found encouraging advances in some schools that we visited during long days and evenings in São Paulo’s periphery. These schools, unlike many in cities of the developed world, are not mainly schools in decline. Rather, most of these are schools operating where no school existed as recently as 20 or 30 years ago. The building of schools was pressured by São Paulo's education authorities to enroll nearly all children, but the challenge of achieving quality education is still formidable.

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Paulo's growth. In our visits we noted physical aspects of school operations (construction, furnishings, lunches, school security, instructional materials and availability and use of libraries and computers) as well as the bureaucratic organization of the system and the work of teachers, supervisors and principals. This essay reports what we found and then analyzes the policy issues that emerge.

**Parque Piratininga II**

Parque Piratininga II is an excellent state school in Itaquaquecetuba, a poor and violent municipality at the eastern edge of the metropolis. The school's previous principal was shot, though he luckily survived. A local joke is that even the guns don't work properly in Itaquá.

The entrance hall is brightly painted, colorful with pupils' work and with a nicely arranged group of cane chairs and table for anyone waiting. Prominent along the wall of the business-like staffroom is a set of charts at eye-height, one for each class, showing the latest teacher evaluations for each subject. Above the line is satisfactory and blue, below the line is unsatisfactory and red. You can see at a glance the areas of concern, by class and by subject.

This school competed against 400 schools tow in a state prize for school management. You can see why. The new principal has hero stringent battery of performance indicators. Teaching is planned and evaluated. New teachers are taught to teach interactively with pupils and to use projects to promote pupil engagement and original work. Evaluations are studied and problem areas tackled. A substitute teacher's file for each class, with the current teaching plan and a copy of each pupil's record, is available for the substitute to use and bring up to date for the return of the regular teacher. The pupils' suggestion box yields 300 or so suggestions each week that receive serious consideration at weekly staff meetings. This school strives for continuous improvement.

The shifts are organized by age group, with 5th to 7th grades in the morning, 8th and 9th grades in the afternoon and 10th and 11th in the evening. This helps to avoid bullying and makes the use of space more efficient so that the school can have dedicated subject classrooms.

The school's main problem is turnover and absenteeism of teachers. Most come from the city center in a long and sometimes dangerous daily journey, with little incentive to work in the periphery. We saw the record of one teacher who had been away for 30 of the last 100 working days for a mixture of sickness, holiday entitlement, approved leave, training and so forth. The principal is powerless to tackle this problem within the current rules. The principal, Fatima, tells us that with so many new staff, she has to spend lots of time re-educating them in the school's insistence on interactive, project-based teaching. Most come, she says, with the habit of teaching from the blackboard with little attempt to engage pupils in discussion, trying only to reach the end of the syllabus by the due date. Their classes are monitored closely until the principal is satisfied.

We join Fatima on her regular check of the hall and toilets after recess. Both pass muster. The school weighs litter and gives the pupils feedback as things improve. These checks are part of the routine battery of performance indicators. The hall is clean and bright and, though Fatima tells us that walls and doors have not been repainted for five years, the paint looks new. Today's local newspaper is displayed on an easel, with the pupils' suggestion-box and a selection of up-to-date magazines on a side-table. Pupils are encouraged to stay in school after their classes end. Activities are provided, but they also enjoy helping out.

The subject taught in each dedicated class-room is clearly identifiable, with printed charts and reference material displayed on the walls and a varied selection of high-quality pupils' work mounted and displayed with respect and artistic flair. In a mathematics class, the teacher explains the task to the 5th grade with care, checking back for understanding, and then walks amongst the grouped tables as the pupils work, answering questions and checking progress. All pupils are on task, except my young neighbor who wants to talk English to me.

We visit the library. It is modest, stocked with 6,000 books, mainly new ones from the government, all referenced properly on their spines and attractively displayed. The library is open during all school hours, staffed by a combination of volunteers and older pupils outside their shift time and overseen by one of the school's pupil supervisors. An ex-pupil was helping while we were there. Students use the library for both loans and reference, and there are worktables for those wanting to do homework. The community as well as pupils may borrow books. Lending is carefully recorded; non-returns are followed up. The school has lost only three books in 1,200 loans – at the houses of families who moved out in a hurry because of death threats.

When Fatima took over, the school was half-wrecked. We saw “before and after” photos of graffiti-laden walls and doors, broken fittings and littered floors. Even toilets were broken. She worked with parents and community groups on plans to develop the school. She created incentives to improve pupil behavior. Pupils dropping litter get a penalty point. Twenty points means a letter home and a fine of one bar of soap, to be used in the pupils' toilets. Blocking or littering toilets or making graffiti gets an immediate soap fine and letter. And so on. Pupils get regular feedback and are praised for improvements.

Parque Piratininga II has the support now of the community. It is the most beautiful and most valued building in the area. The school does not lock its doors while in session but still would welcome a permanent guard to supplement the Military Police patrols. The mainly young and female staff must sometimes deal with frightening intruders. Despite occasional security problems, the school remains open to parents and the community. Trust and openness are valued for improving behavior and teaching methods.

**Success in Itapevi**

When the federal government introduced its policy of
municipalization in 1996, Itapevi, unusually for São Paulo, took over the whole primary school system in its area. In the far west of the metropolitan area, the municipality now runs 50 schools with 20,000 pupils, as well as 12 pre-schools with 5,000 children. The Education Department has taken up the new challenge with enthusiasm and commitment. Expertise in assessing pupils’ work is developing. Since the Education Department started with primary education its main aim has been to raise standards of literacy. Supervisors asked primary teachers to identify pupils having problems. Teachers identified a few pupils lagging behind, but they lacked enough skills to assess their pupils and standards were too low. Their assessments overlooked the low overall literacy attainment levels at age 11 in the schools. Now municipal supervisors, working with school curriculum coordinators, assess all children themselves, and follow the progress of each child through primary school, advising teachers how to develop remedial strategies and improve classroom practice. This work has improved the assessment skills of teachers and curriculum coordinators as well as teaching standards. Comparative statistical data now show significant improvements in literacy at the age of 11.

When the municipality took over the schools, many were in poor condition and vandalized. The town has built and renovated schools using its own architects to create bright and airy environments in contrast to the funereal design of state schools. Teachers are given more non-contact time. A professional development program was created, stressing pre-school teaching. Each school has some autonomy but is accountable for its results. To encourage independent working and allow grouping by ability, pupils form groups of six in their classes at specially designed, hexagonal desks. There are good-quality books and teaching materials in each classroom. The information technology suites are well-used to teach other subjects, augmented by a CDROM library at the teachers’ center. The municipality uses joint ventures with businesses to develop instrumental music and sports, which are not a part of the government’s core curriculum, and have extended these as community projects.

Municipal authorities try to create a sense of love and security in schools and to empower families and the community. Parents contribute ideas for improving the schools. We spoke to teachers who had come to the periphery intending to request a transfer to a more middle-class area as soon as possible, but then stayed, enthused by the excitement of the project.

The Southern Zone

In a former favela plagued by violence, it was getting dark as we arrived after an hour’s drive southward from the city’s center. Chains as well as locks secured the gates of the high school, but the perimeter wall was low and could be climbed easily even by children. A boisterous changeover to the evening shift for mostly adult-sized, jostling students was underway in the corridors. The gates clanged shut just before lessons began with a deafening, prison-style klaxon. The building, though clean and well-kept, is dark and institutional, with little color. The corridor walls to the principal’s office were of whitewashed cinderblock. The floors and washroom walls were of dark grey polished concrete terrazzo, as were the stage and benches. No loose furniture appeared in the public areas. High windows of pebbled glass, open in the warm evening, let in the traffic noise and the World Cup horns and fireworks. There was no litter or graffiti, in contrast to many schools in this area, because this was a school respected by its community. The principal carried a key ring the size of a bunch of grapes.

The school emphasizes teamwork and self-esteem, with creditable results for the area. The principal’s office, decorated with trophies, displayed a curriculum plan and pupil evalua-
tion charts. Classrooms were crowded. Classrooms were crowded, but not impossibly so. Enrollments run up to 50 teenagers and young adults per class. The lack of raw materials was evident in the sameness of the artwork, displayed only in the art room. Chemistry had benches, but only two sinks, no fume cupboard and no gas tap. Five tripods stood in a neat row, with no burners under them or glassware for them to hold. Many copies of the periodic table of elements decorated the walls, hand-copied and colored by pupils. Nothing else. The chemistry classroom was resource-rich compared with biology and physics, which had stools and high tables but no visible teaching resources. In all the classroom visits we saw no printed book, other than in the hands of the teacher. Pupils were excited by our visit and anxious to practice their English or discuss Brazil’s World Cup prospects.

There was a computer room with a dozen PCs, switched off and locked. “We are just setting it up again. All the last lot was stolen.” An inside job? Too complicated to ask. The library? Some minutes to find the key, not in the bunch of grapes. The library is a small cupboard. About a meter’s length of children’s books and encyclopedias from the early 20th Century are on shelves, some stacked flat without their titles visible. Three half opened cartons of beautiful new government-provided books lie on the floor, waiting for someone to sort and shelve them. When the principal was asked to name three most needed changes in the system, the first wish was that teachers would work in just one school, the second was for an eight-hour school day for students and the third for a real gymnasium for sports.

**Teaching and Learning**

While there are good schools in the periphery of Greater São Paulo, problems of scale and fragility in education become clear when we explore issues of teaching and management more broadly. Many areas of neglect or need could be addressed simply enough if staff had more available time. However, the central impediments to learning, seen again and again, are poor classroom practice and teacher absence.

The most important barriers to progress are these:

1. Poor initial training in classroom practice received by teachers.
2. Low pay and low incentives for advancement in the teaching profession, leading to excessive workloads, absenteeism and lack of incentive to improve practice.
3. Laws and rules of employment for teachers that allow excessive absence.
4. Shortage of books and educational resources, particularly in upper secondary schools, where the new federal schemes have not yet reached.

The prevailing style of lesson that we saw was to write notes on the blackboard with little preamble. Teachers usually copy from a text-book, sometimes repeating the notes in an emphatic tone while writing with their backs to the class. They wait for most students to finish students to finish copying before erasing the board and writing more, ending with a few questions for the pupils to answer as an exercise. Class discussion is rare. We saw exceptions to this, not only at Parque Piratininga II but also at Maria Vera Lombardi Siquera, a successful school that appears to have overcome many problems seen elsewhere. Lombardi Siquera improved behavior management by working with groups of pupils to raise their self-esteem and social skills, with the close involvement of parents. We saw good teaching and exceptionally well-behaved pupils in these two schools, both of which recognized the need for inspiring teaching as well as consistent strategies for behavior management.

Most teachers appeared to be trained adequately in their subject. Some told us that they had studied some aspects of pedagogic theory, including child development, during their initial training. But they had had little if any training in classroom practice. Nor did there seem to be in most of the teaching force a model based on experience of what constitutes a good lesson. Teachers simply do not know how to teach effectively.

Teaching was more like lecturing. Notions of planned lessons, introducing a topic, discussing and brainstorming it as a class, followed by small-group or individual research or exercises and then a plenary discussion to fix the key points in pupils’ minds, were rare. Most teachers did not question individual pupils, check progress with class work or assign written work. In a number of the secondary classes we observed, less than a half of the pupils were “on task.” Project-based work was found rarely, even in the better schools we visited.

In-service training with demonstrations or videos of well-taught lessons may help. But long-term change will come only with improvements to initial teacher training. Teaching of reading in 1st grade may be critical, given the widespread functional illiteracy reported at age 11 by secondary schools. We saw teaching of letters and syllables and of handwriting and spelling being done confidently and efficiently. Most children in primary school could associate letters with sounds and could decode syllables. Most achieve a neat cursive script by the end of primary schooling. Trainee primary teachers at the “normal” school we visited and teachers at primary schools are now being taught the importance of developing the child’s imagination and motivation to read by reading stories to them, asking them to make up stories based on the pictures. They tell the story in their own words before working through the book. This represents an advance that should be supplemented by children reading for themselves individually.
We saw primary schools that had no graded reading books. We met incomprehension when we asked trainee primary teachers how children could be encouraged to read simple books and work at their own pace through increasingly complex texts, perhaps with help from a volunteer or their parents. It would be impossible, with over 30 pupils in a class, to work with pupils individually. Generations of children in England, in classes as large as primary classes in São Paulo, have been led effectively to independent reading through this method. Parents are usually asked to help and children take their reading books home to read to members of their family, with progress marked in a record book. The literacy controversy in England focuses on the lack of more formal teaching of decoding skills, an area where Brazilian teachers could help some of their English colleagues. As a result of the lack of independent reading practice in São Paulo schools, pupils' understanding of the text lags behind their ability to decode sounds. When teachers wrote questions on the board, we saw pupils in classes at all levels copy the questions and think the task was complete. Composing original texts is not a common part of the pupil’s day in most schools. Pupils in most classes are being asked to memorize, not to think or evaluate for themselves. The lack of focus on individual pupils may be due to the excessive hours that many teachers work. In São Paulo, where living costs are high, teachers often toil a third shift at night, for another employer, to add to meager salaries. That means a working day of 7 am to 10 pm. Teachers in the São Paulo state system get four hours statutory paid non-contact time per week to take part in curriculum planning meetings. All other time is contact time. A teacher working three shifts may teach more than 600 pupils in a week. Assigning and marking individual home work in these conditions is not a realistic expectation, although more could be done during lessons.

Teachers’ absenteeism is a major block to improving quality of education. It can be understood in terms of low pay, long hours, danger, long commutes to schools they have not chosen for themselves and lack of incentive for professional development. Employment rules allow a level of condoned absences that make good school management impossible. Teachers are allowed up to 42 days of condoned absence, not including sickness absence, in addition to 30 days of paid holiday. Some of this is mothers’ statutory entitlement to time off for their own children’s needs. The teacher at Parque Piratininga who had a 30% absentee record had violated no rule and thus could not be disciplined. We were told that 30% absence was on the high side, but not exceptional. At another school only half the schools we visited we saw classes either sent home or watching videos because no substitute teacher could be found. Substitute teachers, in startling numbers, are a regular feature of school life, and for some pupils it is a rarity to see their assigned teacher. They just get a series of substitutes. Constant substitution and frequent missed lessons damage the educational development of children and give them clear messages of where they stand in the priorities of the system. How can pupils be convinced that their education is important when their teachers appear to treat it so casually?

The most important need is to increase teachers’ commitment to their pupils and schools. Getting this kind of commitment from education staff and teachers is difficult in the huge state machine. Teachers who do not know and identify with their pupils are less likely to put imagination into their teaching and more likely to take advantage of lax attendance rules. A major step forward would be to increase school autonomy and to allow principals to appoint their own staff. More municipalization of primary schools could also help. The municipal schools we saw generally provided more resources, more security and better pay for teachers, because of the closer identify caution of municipalities with local schools.

Poor pay of school principals and the lack of a middle management structure also contribute to absenteeism and lack of ambition in teaching practice. Teachers’ salaries show a relatively large increase for length of service, and provide extra allowances for more qualification. However, there are few financial incentives for advancement. There are few senior posts in schools compared with schools in England, and salary differentials for promotion are less than the built-in rise for length of service. Every school has at least one curriculum coordinator whose task is to work with teachers to formulate a curriculum development plan. These are temporary appointments, subject to annual election by the staff. The posts carry an allowance, but promise no significant career or pay advantage. The only other senior posts are the principal and deputy-principal. The deputy often covers the evening shift. There is little financial incentive to assume these responsibilities: salary differentials between a principal or deputy and ordinary teachers are low by international standards. This means that the prospect of advancement as a motivator for good attendance and successful teaching is absent.

A controversial issue is the recent introduction of “automatic promotion” of pupils who have not met the required standard. Brazil has very high repetition rates. Pupils who are left back lose their peer group, may feel humiliated and may suffer the boredom of repetition. Such pupils are far more likely to drop out of school. The state government of São Paulo, seeking to reduce the dropout rate, recently introduced a policy to discourage schools from requiring repetition, supporting the policy with a project to provide summer vacation “catch-up” classes. Many school principals and teachers we spoke to describe automatic promotion in derogatory terms. Reducing repetition must be coupled with improving skills to teach mixed-ability groups. In England, with a different tradition, pupils are automatically promoted. This requires teachers to be able to teach mixed-ability groups. Teachers in schools for pupils below the age of 11 usually group children within the classroom by ability for at least part of the day. Children with significant problems may be withdrawn for part of the day and taught in small groups with the aim of getting them up to standard and reintegrating them. From age 11, schools are bigger, and children are often put into parallel “sets” for core curriculum subjects, of perhaps three levels of ability, depend-
ing on the size of school. However, all teachers are expected to manage their classes so as to deal with different levels of ability. This kind of teaching is missing from the way the state policy of reducing repetition is being implemented in São Paulo.

Assessment and Use of Data

Pupil assessment in Brazil is largely through informal classroom observation and year-end tests made by teachers. It still lacks comparative analysis of data, although a significant beginning has been made in the State of São Paulo. The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (Inep) started in 1990 the collection, processing and data analysis for primary and secondary education through SAEB. A national examination for high school leavers, ENEM, was introduced in 1998, although aggregated results are not publicly available and are not used to assess schools. The State of São Paulo has tried to get objective data by which to measure schools’ achievements comparatively and to provide longitudinal data, with the introduction of the SARESP (System of School Performance Evaluation of São Paulo), which tests literacy, numeracy and knowledge of science using short, multiple choice questions. While still not publicly available, the data have been used, together with state assessments of other aspects of school management, to classify schools into five levels of concern, to allow more concentration on the lowest-ranking schools. This is a significant achievement and a basis on which to build strategies for measured improvement.

But teachers are not, in most schools, accustomed to being accountable for pupils’ results. At Parque Piratininga II, the annual SARESP results were displayed prominently on the wall of the assembly hall and clearly targeted for improvement. But this was an exception. Officials and some principals voiced concerns to us that the rigor of this system might be watered down, because of the unpopularity of identifying failure.

The only publicly available comparative data by which to judge Brazil’s educational performance are from the OECD’s PISA study, in which Brazil, together with China, Latvia and Russia, participates alongside the OECD countries. PISA, starting in 2000 with the first of a three-yearly program of comparative pupil tests, uses a statistically valid sample of 15 year-old pupils from each country and asks questions designed to assess understanding and skills in literacy, numeracy and science. Although part of the test is multiple choice, pupils also have to show understanding and the ability to analyze in other parts that require written answers. The first results, focusing on literacy, put Brazil at the bottom of the table. Finland ranked first. To give an idea of the comparison, 16% of British pupils scored in the top fifth, 9% at the lowest rank and 4% below the lowest ranking. In Brazil, 1% of pupils were in the top fifth, 33% at the lowest rank, and 23% below the lowest ranking.

Teaching Resources

By comparison with many developing countries, most of the schools we saw were not badly off. However, by comparison with the generally high level of affluence and urbanity of the city center of São Paulo, the schools of the periphery seem poverty stricken. The most striking symptom of this is the lack of books and charts in class rooms. In schools that maintain subject bases there is no subject library in class rooms, and even staff rooms are often bare. In the two geography lessons we saw, there were no maps or globes available. Libraries in schools visited were, with one exception, kept locked. In one state secondary school, the library was open for two hours on alternate days, overlapping from the afternoon into the evening shift, so that pupils had access for one hour on alternate days. The key was not kept on the school premises outside those hours. Primary class rooms that we saw, with the exception of those in Itapevi, had no graded reading books or simple storybooks. New government and state book programs are starting to have an impact in some schools, but in many these resources are not well-used. Books were often poorly displayed, sometimes with the titles not visible, and treated without respect. We only saw one school that had catalogued its library. To many teachers, books were said to be as disposable as magazines, a legacy of Brazil’s historical lack of a literate middle class.

Telecommunications infrastructure is good in Brazil. Most schools have an IT teaching suite of 10 or 20 networked machines, in a dedicated classroom, provided through a recent state scheme. The aim is to provide pupils access through the internet to resources and material that they do not have in their own schools. Lack of teacher training in the use of IT for
teaching and learning, as well a sin dealing with security problems, were barriers to the effective use of IT in some schools. However, the program is in its early days. Poor security records of some schools discourage free access to many materials. Teachers in Brazil are not trained to enliven their classroom with high-quality display work. Schools that defy this trend do so by their independent efforts.

Teaching style probably contributes to the shortage of materials. Schools in São Paulo have some funding for teaching materials. However, a teacher who believes that the task is to reproduce important parts of the syllabus on the board for pupils to copy and learn is unlikely to demand equipment and supplies for more challenging experimentation or demonstration. Nonetheless, if Brazil is to make the most of its potential, more effort and money need to be invested in books, teaching materials, laboratory facilities and equipment.

School Security

Security, either of people or school assets, is commonly cited as a cause of teaching deficiencies in peripheral schools. Waves of illegal building in the periphery have some times evolved into more conventional or even “regularized” neighborhoods. Family homes of reasonable size, but with high densities, were created by purchase and enlargement of one room shacks. Bricks and tiles replaced the original packing cases and corrugated iron. Sewage and piped water and legal electricity connections made communities more livable. But much of São Paulo’s periphery remains poor, violent and difficult to service and manage by public authorities.

Solid looking façades of single-family homes hide warrens of precarious shelters in the back yards. Population turnover is rapid and hard to predict.

Good school principals can build bridges with their communities, which see that their schools are kept safe. But this requires exceptional leadership ability. Some principals struggle against the odds and live in fear. In many schools, buildings are vandalized and covered with graffiti, drugs are sold, alcohol consumed and the weak terrorized.

There seems to be a standard exterior wall in the design of São Paulo schools, of concrete block, no more than about 2.5 meters high. No spikes, barbed wire or electric fencing are allowed like those surrounding apartment blocks in middle-class districts. They are easily climbed and make good jumping off points for the roof. Schools are thus vulnerable to invasion, vandalism and theft. Most state schools have interior barred gates that securely divide the public areas, in contrast to their vulnerability from outside. Theft by intruders of computers is common. Some schools are covered, inside and out with graffiti, and have windows broken, furniture and fittings damaged. Others in similar areas are clean and intact. Relation ships between schools and their communities can create respect and protection. But, where necessary, the physical protection of the school by effective perimeter fencing seems a cost-effective investment.

State schools needing protection are visited sporadically by Military Police patrols. Many schools, even those with good community relations, feel vulnerable and would welcome a permanent guard, particularly at pupil changeover time when there can be drug-dealing and shooting, or the threat of it, near the school. In a city where supermarkets and apartment blocks are routinely guarded continuously, schools full of children and mostly female staff in violent neighborhoods need better protection. Fear of violence is prevalent and insidious. Greater São Paulo’s schools badly need an organized school security program.

Behavior of pupils

In general the standards of behavior and the attitudes to teachers of pupils that we saw were remarkably good, considering the rather boring lessons. Strikingly, the best behaved groups of pupils that we saw were in the two schools where teaching was interactive. The principal of one of these schools said that if the children are bored and not learning, their behavior will become more difficult to contain. This view is unusual in São Paulo’s periphery, where problems tend to be blamed by parents on teachers or by teachers on parents and pupils, but where acceptance of responsibility for pupil attainment and behavior is rare.

Pupil attendance is a big problem. In almost every class observed or visited, the number of pupils present was well below the reported class size. Either registrations are not all genuine, or attendance is low. Conversations with principals and officials suggest that both are true. Although the state-wide computerized enrollment system has greatly reduced multiple registration of pupils, it is still difficult to keep track of pupils in the periphery. Truancy and dropouts are the main problems. Talks with pupils and parents in an area of a secondary school with big problems suggested that fear of bullying, disruption by disaffected pupils, violent incursions by non-pupils, drug and alcohol abuse within the school, boredom because of absent teachers and the vandalized school environment were all factors in low attendance and high dropout rates.

Organization of Schools

Brazilian states are responsible constitution-ally for providing places for universal compulsory education from age six to the end of high school. In São Paulo, four-shift schooling was common until the 1990s and still survives in few schools, but three shifts are the norm. Brazil is one of only a handful of countries in the world where this is still true. Daytime shifts are generally five hours, starting at around 7 am, and evening shifts four hours starting at 7 pm. Planning and provision of schools and enrollments pose a complex task for state and municipal officials that is generally done well. Although primary enrollments are now falling city-wide, the demand in new settlements in the periphery still challenges education officials. Forecasting demand is difficult because birth registration is not reliable and the population in the periphery is very mobile. Nonetheless, nearly all pupils are found places.
The school system is engaged in a slow and controversial municipalization of primary schools under a federal policy that may now be halted or reversed, according to the program of the Workers Party (PT) of Brazil’s new President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Many towns resisted municipalization, influenced by PT mayors and PT-led teachers’ unions. The state is not pressing hard for municipalization, negotiating with each municipal council according to what is politically feasible. Where municipalities refuse to run primary schools, the state must continue to provide them. Thus there are many kinds of public schools with overlapping functions. Municipalities are responsible for providing pre-schools for children under age six. The municipality of São Paulo, with a population of 10 million, is struggling to overcome a deficit of 100,000 pre-school places. Smaller and wealthier municipalities often do better.

To manage the school system and monitor the quality of education among the 39 municipalities in the metropolitan area and the 645 local governments in São Paulo State, with 35 million people, the State Education Department operates regional offices that can cover several municipalities. Each has a regional director and curriculum specialists, school “supervisors” and specialists for finance, buildings, enrollments, meals and supplies, typically a staff of about 30. The large state machine is thus broken down into local units. However, it still finds it difficult to engage with communities in the way that municipalities can. Despite the good intentions of many working within it, the size of the state bureaucracy makes it difficult to create a vibrant, education management structure such as we saw in two municipalities.

**Appointment of Staff**

The system for appointing school staff and principals in São Paulo, though designed to be fair and impartial, creates perverse results. The appointment is done centrally by the state, a huge task, with regional offices empowered to take on temporary and substitute teachers. The appointment of principals in other states and in municipalities is often a political process. To avoid undue political influence, a public examination ranks candidates in São Paulo. The exam is held as often as demand dictates. Successful candidates are classified according to their marks and their other qualifications and experience. They are then, in rank order, invited to choose their position from the statewide list of available posts, including all posts covered by temporary appointments. Because the exams are held at irregular and often infrequent intervals, temporary appointments to teaching and school principal posts abound. Temporary appointees, or those with lower examination marks or qualifications, can often find themselves ousted if candidates with higher marks want their posts. This is disruptive to schools and can be heartbreaking for staff, particularly for principals who have put their energies into turning around a school. To show the scale of the problem, in Diadema, where the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics conducts field research, principals were replaced in 44 of 67 state schools at the beginning of 2002.

The same process is used for the appointment of teachers. Most schools we visited suffered from this disruption. Some teachers in good schools claimed to denigrate their school to colleagues from elsewhere for fear of losing their positions in this way. There is no system of competitive interviews and applying for individual jobs. Schools have no say in who is appointed. It is hard to build teachers’ commitment to schools and pupils, and schools’ commitment to teachers, when there is so much staff turnover and absence.

The independent spirit of school principals needs to be encouraged by the system, because schools in São Paulo’s periphery need exceptionally strong leadership. However, with some outstanding exceptions, we saw a culture of anxious compliance within the large state machine. Different things were sometimes said by staff who were alone than when state officials were present. Having principals feeling vulnerable in temporary positions does not help. The state needs to foster more overtly the leadership qualities of principals. That means making it clear that expressing an independent view is not only permitted but encouraged.

Non teaching staff are few. Schools normally employ a caretaker/handyman and some non-teaching staff to supervise breaks, meal-times and lesson changes. Libraries are usually not staffed. Science technicians are not employed, even in the technical school we visited.
School Supervision

Supervisors, appointed and managed by regional directors, form the key link between the school and the state education bureaucracy. There are many complaints about how this system works. While carrying a caseload that looks manageable if it were primarily for educational monitoring and advice, supervisors oversee a range of administrative areas as well as the curriculum. They also cover private schools. São Paulo State runs several pilot development projects, many aimed at widening the experience of pupils, promoting sport and arts education and involving the community in schools. Supervisors monitor all these projects. This leaves little time to focus on the quality of teaching and learning or to use test data to challenge schools to improve their performance. In the periphery, there are complaints that supervisors rarely visit the schools and almost never enter a classroom. Training and management of supervisors' workload is needed so they can spend more time in schools and classrooms to challenge and support those that need it most.

School Buildings

State schools are built to a relatively uniform pattern, with 10-15 classrooms and a covered assembly/dining/recreation area, often semi-open, and rooms for the principal, teaching staff, administrators and curriculum coordinators. Laboratories are usually provided only in upper secondary (post-16) schools. One or two basketball courts, also used for soccer by small groups, are the normal sports areas. Schools do not usually have enough land for much athletics education which, with the widespread use of polished concrete that can give rise to serious noise problems, make the teacher's task more difficult. The general style of state schools is utilitarian, dark and depressing. Bars and chains abound. It contrasts with municipal pre-schools and primary schools. The new and refurbished buildings in Itapevi show what could be done to provide a more human environment.

School Meals

The school meals system in São Paulo is a real success story. Meals are free, freshly cooked on the premises from high-quality fresh ingredients and appetizing. Food is cooked and served with real care. Kitchen stores are filled with crates of fresh fruit, salads, vegetables and new sacks of rice and dried beans. Meat and eggs are served regularly. Those meals we were kindly served during the study were far better than those in British state schools. The mechanism of provision varies. Sometimes the state con-tracts out provision to the local municipality. Sometimes the municipality may outsource to the private sector. Most schools can influence the menu choices. Some schools in the periphery provide extra food to pupils on Mondays, because pupils have not had enough to eat over the weekend. This nutritional boost to pupils pays off in the alertness and health of children, which is visibly better than in some deprived areas of Britain, and provides a real incentive to attend.

Funding

Education funding in Brazil rose sharply over the last 15 years. The constitution was amended in 1996 to set minimum levels of education spending, as a share of revenues, for each level of government. Federal funds add to spending by local governments unable to achieve the mini-mum. This far-reaching program, “Fundef”, also provides a financial mechanism for transfer of state primary schools to municipalities.

Nonetheless, Brazil fails to invest enough in primary and secondary education. While Brazil’s public spending on education is about 5% of GDP, equal to that of most advanced countries, outlays heavily favor universities, while primary and secondary schools are starved for money. Brazil spends only 14% of its per capita GDP for each pupil in primary school and 16% in secondary schools, far below education investment in many advanced and developing countries. However, Brazil spends nearly double its GDP per capita on each public university student, or roughly four times as much as in rich countries. Official sources have not updated the 1998 spending figures in PPP terms to permit international comparisons that take into account currency depreciations since then that eroded the dollar value of Brazil’s real by two-thirds.

In Brazil, state governments are the primary source of funding for secondary schools. São Paulo spends 30% of its budget on education, including state universities. Funding is
not transparent. São Paulo does not provide break-downs of its education spending by types of schools. However, the Secretary of Education said in April 2002 that system-wide annual spending per pupil was R$1,250, or US$500, compared with US$10,000 per pupil in New York City. States of the Northeast spend less than $150 per pupil. Provision of staff and funding to schools within São Paulo, as in other states, is not targeted to modify social disadvantage. No systematic allowance is made in resources or teaching ratios for the additional needs of poor children. Many parents are not literate enough to help their children with reading or schoolwork. Schools in São Paulo have limited delegated funds to cover minor building re-pairs and teaching materials. All else is funded centrally. Schools have little say in how money is spent. Most schools would welcome greater delegation and more local control, particularly in the appointment of staff.

The Future

The achievements and problems of public education are not much debated in Brazil. But policies are shifting to reflect a greater emphasis on quality throughout the large and diverse system. Current education policy in Brazil flows from a basic federal law passed in 1996 that set curriculum guidelines, introduced the municipalization policy and a requirement for states to monitor the performance of their education system. Policy changes have been made and the results begin to be visible. The State of São Paulo started in the mid-1990’s to measure pupil attainment and therefore to identify those schools most in need of challenge and support. It has developed a school classification scheme based on these results, together with dropout rates and more subjective measures of success. An inducement scheme encourages teacher attendance and has reduced the rate of pupil repetition of grades. Pilot projects are designed to promote social inclusion, to en-courage community involvement with schools and to provide catch -up classes for failing pupils. Small advances have been made towards greater school autonomy. But there is often a shortfall between these changes in policy and changes in practice.

In each of the schools we visited and in discussions with officials, the state principals’ union and the school supervisors’ union, we asked this question:

If you had three wishes for public schools, what would they be?

Many principals and officials were concerned primarily with improving social conditions in the periphery. But they agreed on full school days for students, teachers to teach in one school and better pay for teachers so they could work a normal day and concentrate better on their pupils. My own wish-list expands beyond three. Many officials and school principals in São Paulo share some, if not all, of these wishes.

1. Develop ways of improving the class-room practice of working teachers at all levels, including videos of demonstration lessons, and demonstrations inside schools.

2. Improve practice in the initial development of independent reading for pleasure.

3. Address the many factors that create the conditions for the lack of professional pride and alarming levels of teacher absenteeism. The include the career progression of teachers, the monitoring and evaluation of their practice and the appointments system.

4. Develop different approaches to school security to give more support and protection to schools with special problems.

5. Improve management and increase training for school supervisors to focus their work on helping schools to become self-diagnosing, self-improving institutions. Separate school supervision from administration.

Beyond these institutional measures, we observed that a common feature of all the successful schools we visited was strong relationship with their communities.

I should like also to pay tribute to the many outstanding individuals we met in schools, within the state, municipal and technical education hierarchies and the unions. We what seemed overwhelming odds, with great commitment to improving the system. Lastly I would like to wish good luck to the delightful, vibrant, creative and resourceful children of the periphery of São Paulo who start at primary schools so
bright-eyed and full of hope. I found the children and young people I met in this vast, violent and chaotic periphery to be welcoming, witty and graceful in all senses of the word. Some people I met in this vast, violent and chaotic periphery to be bright-eyed and full of hope. I found the children and young people I met in this vast, violent and chaotic periphery to be welcoming, witty and graceful in all senses of the word. Some

Claudio de Moura Castro

Why So Little Learning in São Paulo’s Periphery?

The outsider’s eye does not always see things the same way as our own. Hence my interest in the visit to Brazil by an English woman, a skilled observer from a mature educational system. She is especially welcome for having come to visit schools and not to prattle about stylish teaching methods or expound ideology. Her commentary from school visits in the periphery of São Paulo reveals much in common with the analyses made by our best observers. Still, there are differences of perspective.

Jane Wreford did see awful things, shameful things. But she also saw projects in which there is dedication, originality and success. Taking her observations as a starting point, we can come back to the central question: how is Brazilian education working? The stagnating results of the SAEB, a national basic-skills exam, show no improvement since 1991. Wreford’s field notes reinforce the view of deplorable schools.

But I want to look at these facts: In the 1960s, with the burst of expansion of high schools in the United States, average national test scores fell considerably. In contrast, we have managed an extraordinary expansion in primary enrollments and graduations without a fall in quality. The horrific things we see in our schools are nothing new. What is new is that these things are exposed and made public. Moreover, Wrefo rd was able to see the seeds of change beginning to sprout. In other words, what is bad is old – even though there is plenty of that – and much of what is new is good.

Much observation reflecting on the social conflagration in São Paulo’s periphery leads Wreford to recommend more care for school security. Fortunately, however, problems of security do not occur with the same intensity in most schools elsewhere in Brazil. She confirms that the face of the principal becomes the face of the school. Good principal, clean school, healthy atmosphere, and strong community involvement. All the more reason to insist on the need for building administrative stability, to avoid undoing the work initiated by principals and teachers who are rapidly and carelessly transferred.

Her most emphatic observations, about classroom practice, merit all our attention. According to Wreford, teachers are not trained to teach effectively. Curiously, methods of teaching the alphabet and phonics receive praise, but subsequently the students do not learn to use this foundation to form a capacity and desire to read for plea-sure. Nor do they write, nor are they challenged to think, nor do they learn the habit of reading independently. They learn to copy from the blackboard, and they are told that this is enough. In other words, there are mistakes in teaching strategy so fundamental that it would be hard to avoid classroom failure. The Achilles heel remains the poor training of our teachers. To have a working Bunsen burner and the teacher and students doing experiments seems a major challenge. But, as Wreford says, if just decades ago classes of the same size in England learned to read books and to write texts creatively on their own, this cannot be so difficult in Brazil.

Wreford was scandalized by the situation of the libraries. Nearly nonexistent, and where they exist, they are closed most of the time and not taken seriously. Boxes of books sent by the state and federal governments lie unopened in storerooms or in the principal’s office. But when the principal takes an interest, the library grows and is used well.

The inexplicable regulations allowing a high level of absenteeism shocked the visitor. Indeed, why does almost no one talk about this, requiring a visit by an English-woman to tell us that the emperor has no clothes? Why the conspiracy of silence, in the face of legislation allowing teachers to miss classes, with impunity, 42 days a year? School supervision is seen as deficient. It is overloaded with uncreative bureaucratic activity of no help to classroom teaching. This is another taboo. In fact, it is forbidden to talk of classroom inspectors that actually visit classrooms. For our teach ers, this is a hated breach of the teacher’s sovereignty. The English lady did not know about teachers’ acquired rights.

In the 1970s, we did field research in a cross-section of Brazilian schools. The only thing that was better in Brazilian schools than in other Latin America countries was school lunch. Interesting to see that this is again today the one area in which we win effusive praise.

The optimistic view of this attentive and critical visitor comes with her description of schools having creativity, discipline, with serious atmosphere and effective instruction. And these schools may be in dangerous and socially disorganized areas. In other words, there are people who know how to do things right. Poverty does not prevent people from doing things right. The challenge is to make the system reproduce these successes that result from effort and leader-ship, so that they do not remain exceptions. Thank you so much, Lady Jane, for your visit. Please come back often.

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