

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM-2.
The Problem of Primary School
Education in Pernambuco.

Recife,
 Pernambuco.

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Mr. Richard Nolte,
 Institute of Current World Affairs,
 366 Madison Avenue,
 New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The problem of education universally has, at all levels, two distinguishable and to a large extent separable, elements, the quantitative and the qualitative. The former would generally be considered the less controversial of the two. Most people would agree that the greatest numbers possible should be educated as highly as possible: the debatable points are those of priorities rather than ultimate aims. The question of quality is very much more complex, and it is not a question about which people have agreed objectives. It includes naturally the methodology of teaching and the organisation of the types of educational establishments by size, age and specialisation; and while unlimited financial resources could theoretically solve the former problem of quantity to the satisfaction of all, they would not necessarily solve the latter.

A great many people here in Brazil hold that education, or the lack of it, is the major bottleneck holding back Brazilian economic growth. Nobody would deny that the standard of education at all levels is much too low, and that educational opportunities are too few. In most cases, only money can buy an adequate education, and I have noticed that every middle class and upper-middle class family that I have met gives very high priority indeed to giving their children the best education they can afford.

James Brewer in his INCWA newsletter (JCB-36) described the disheartening state of education in Brazil in general, and in Guanabara in particular. In two respects, however, his figures fail to bring home the magnitude of the problem. Firstly, although the figures that he gives of the proportion of children attending the various types of school are in themselves pretty appalling when compared with similar figures for a developed country, the degree of the deficiency becomes the more shocking when the age structure of the population as a whole is taken into consideration. No less than 53% of the population were under 20 years old in 1960. The infant mortality rate is likely to fall more quickly than the mortality rate of adults, and unless the birth rate falls, the proportion of the population under 20 years old will continue to rise. Of these, about 40% are between the ages of seven and fourteen and should, therefore, be receiving primary education, and this means that the whole of the enormous financial burden falls on a relatively small proportion of the total Brazilian population.

The other point which James Brewer's analysis does not bring out, is that in a country the size of Brazil the regional statistics are so great that it is frequently very misleading to take national figures as being in any sense representative of the constituent regions. The national figures tend to obscure the size of the educational problem in much of the country, and the one state that James Brewer considers in detail, Guanabara, is one of the very richest and best equipped. For example, the percentage of children attending primary school in the

seven to fourteen age group in 1964 was 66% for the country as a whole. In Guanabara it had reached the respectable level of 93%, but for the whole of the North East the proportion was only 53%; in the state of Maranhão it was as low as 40%.

Here, in Pernambuco, the need for more education cannot be exaggerated. The human wastage is appalling and all too evident. In 1964 (these are the last figures published) the state was still allocating only a minute proportion of its expenditure to this field. This in fact amounted to less than 3% of its budget. The type of school probably most needed, and certainly the one which affects the greatest number of people is the primary school. For this reason I have here concentrated upon them. I have been talking to people involved with, and looking at statistics related to the educational picture in this state, which of all the states in the North East has the highest level of school attendance. The state has three distinct geographical areas: the Zona da Mata lies nearest the sea and is still almost exclusively devoted to sugar cane plantations and production. Behind this 30 to 70 kilometres inland, lies the Agreste or semi-arid zone where the land is both higher and dryer, and a variety of crops are grown. It has four towns of over 20,000 inhabitants. Finally there is the Sertão, the semi-desert arid region which is the poorest of the three areas ecologically and has only five towns with populations of over 10,000. The educational pattern for the Agreste and the Sertao is similar, and therefore I have distinguished only the Zona da Mata from the other two regions. I have separated the capital of the state, Recife, from the Zona da Mata as its figures are very different from those of the surrounding countryside. Recife is the largest town in the North East and is, moreover, important as a port and as a centre of commerce, administration and industry. The distribution of population of the three areas is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| 1964 Est. | Recife: | 842,000 |
| | Zona da Mata: | 1,284,000 |
| | Agreste & Sertao | 1,890,000 |

The numbers of children of primary school age and the attendance level were:

| | <u>Total popn. 7-14 years.</u> | <u>No. attending school.</u> | <u>Proportion.</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Recife: | 155,262 | 130,371 | 84% |
| Zona da Mata: | 252,926 | 156,444 | 62% |
| Agreste & Sertao: | 364,099 | 207,047 | 57% |

Attendance in Recife is the highest, as one would expect from a highly urban area. In the other two regions, especially the interior ones, attendance is extremely low. If the figures are analysed on a rural-urban basis rather than a regional the lack of attendance is even more horrifying in the rural areas. In both the rural areas of the Zona da Mata and the interior it is only 47%.

Why are these figures so low? Some of the reasons may perhaps be found in the system of primary school education itself. Theoretically the organisation of the system is as follows. There are five grades to be passed through, at the end of which time the child is ready to attend a secondary school. Each grade should take one year, and contains a generally recognised syllabus. In practice, things do not work out like this. One of the roots of the evil that has plagued the whole system is that promotion to the next grade at the end of each academic year is by no means automatic. It is dependent upon the standard attained by each pupil which is assessed by the form teacher by means of an examination, or some more arbitrary method. In principle, therefore, a child enters school at the age of seven - already late by many countries' standards - and completes his primary education at the age of eleven. In fact, a very small proportion indeed have passed through all five

grades by then, and the great majority never do so, even if they go until they are fourteen years old or more. Thus, in 1963, for the state as a whole, 61% of the total children attending primary school were in the first grade, whilst under 5% were in the fifth grade. On the other hand, 44% of the children were eleven years old or more, and only 29% were eight years old or less. The picture has improved in the last ten years. In the mid-fifties the proportion being promoted in state schools was only about 55%, but by 1963 it had risen to 83%, and the difference between the capital and the interior has been greatly reduced. This was only achieved by enormous pressure from the local inspectors, and an attempt to standardize the method of promotion, firstly by persuading teachers to introduce tests rather than an arbitrary appraisal, and secondarily to adopt tests of a consistent difficulty so that promotions would be at a similar level in all schools. Outside the sphere of the state inspectors, the private schools nevertheless promoted 82% of the children in 1963, but in the municipal schools only 61% were promoted. Unfortunately, the last type of school is the most numerous, and is generally considered to be the weakest in all respects. In the whole state about two thirds of the schools are run by the municipalities, and the remainder are divided equally between the state and private bodies, with about a dozen schools set up and run by the federal government.

This very low rate of promotion is partly due to the shortage of teachers and classrooms. In very many of the schools, especially in the rural areas, there is only one teacher and one classroom for children of all ages and standards. Classes tend to be very large with over half of them having between 30 and 40 pupils, and another 25% having 40 to 50 in a class. The ratio of teachers to schools gives some indication of the number of classes per school, although in some cases, especially in Recife, the teacher may take two separate sessions a day. In state schools the average ratio was 3.7 teachers per school in 1963, in private schools it was 2.3, whilst in municipal schools there was an average of only just over one. All three figures are too low, but in the last case there can be only one class for pupils of all grades in most of the schools. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the number of promotions is so low. The majority of schools do not even aim to teach beyond the third grade, so that a child cannot, unless he changes school, receive any form of secondary education since he is not prepared for it. One final factor which makes the picture even worse, although it is impossible to verify if from statistics, is that the fall-out rate of pupils is extremely high. Only a very small proportion of the total complete the whole of the five or six years of primary education.

The situation in Recife is rather different. Attendance levels are higher and the opportunities for secondary education greater. Here the problems are to reduce the shortage of places for the rapidly rising city population, and to raise the standard of teaching in many of the schools. The former problem is being tackled in two ways. Firstly, existing schools are being expanded, and secondly, new schools are being built. Unfortunately, neither method in its present form of execution is entirely satisfactory. Due to the limited size of the buildings it is generally impossible to increase the number of concurrent classes, and therefore the only solution is to hold several sessions a day with a consequent shortening of the hours of attendance in some cases. Most have two sessions, of four hours each, with one in the morning and the other after lunch, but some have three sessions and each of these is of only three hours duration. Comparing the number of teachers with the number of classes, most teach for only one session a day, so that the shortage is one of buildings rather than staff. The other way of meeting the shortage, by building new schools, has in the last

five years been undertaken on a large scale by the Prefeitura of Recife. Before the 1964 revolution the group concerned was the Movimento de Cultura Popular, and since that time it has been the Fundacao Guararapes. Both of these have, to their disadvantage, been strongly politically orientated, and have been more concerned with popularising their respective parties than radically improving the level of education in the city. Using schools as a political weapon, they have together provided between 200 and 300 schools with places for about 30,000 children. But, by offering non-competitive salaries they have attracted a poorer quality of staff and they are generally considered very weak. The main needs, therefore, are for the state to build more schools to eliminate the need for a rota system, and for the Prefeitura to raise the standard of its existing schools. If the latter merely continues its present policy of quantity rather than quality, it will in the long run only reduce the general standard of education by drawing off children who would otherwise have gone to schools which, though overcrowded, would nevertheless have better teachers.

The question is, why are attendance figures, especially in the rural areas, so low, and what can be done to improve them? Two of the reasons are only marginally related to the educational system, but they are nevertheless of some importance. The health of children often prevents them from attending school regularly, and educational authorities can help the situation by providing one adequate meal a day for all children, many of whom suffer from a very unbalanced diet; and they can also increase basic health education on sanitation and cleanliness. In the most isolated areas transport problems prevent some children from attending school, and this could be removed by the provision of school buses. It must however be stressed that by no means all the schools are situated in the towns or even large villages. About 60% are in rural areas outside either.

Basically, the problem of attendance is much more directly a concern of the schools themselves. The answer seems to me to lie not so much in increasing the number of primary schools in the rural areas, but in improving the quality and reorganising those already in existence. One of the first needs is to separate the different age groups and standards. To do this, more teachers are needed. It would obviously not be practicable to have a separate teacher for each grade in the small country schools, and therefore, to kill two birds with one stone, a solution would be to reduce the number of schools thereby freeing a number of teachers. They would supplement the numbers in the remaining schools and enable the grades to be separated. The displaced children would also be sent to the remaining schools and put with children of their own grade. This would give the higher grades enough pupils (or potential pupils) for a reasonable sized class. Administration costs and overheads should be reduced, and the amount of equipment for each school increased in the process. These measures would not necessarily reduce the size of the classes, but they would lead to the classes containing children of approximately the same age and standard who could be taught as a unit instead of having what amounts virtually to individual tuition for 1/40 of the time.

At present conditions are such that children learn relatively little, and what they do learn is not of much use to them later in life. The approach to teaching is at present too didactic. The child is told a fact, and is expected to accept it and remember it. The teacher has not the time to devote much extra attention to the exceptionally bright or backward child, and the opportunities for any sort of group activities with such a wide variety of ages and standards are very few. At the moment, all the stress is laid upon the importance of literacy at the expense of all else, and even subsequently primary school education

centres almost entirely around book learning. There are very few expeditions, practical classes or any sort of projects to give scope to individual initiative. For the majority of children all over the state primary school education is all that they will get. It is the only chance to teach them more practical skills relevant to their future lives, as well as the use of literacy. If more subjects related to farming and agriculture could be introduced, the children themselves would see more point in attending school, and parents would make more effort to send them regularly. Such measures, together with the separation of grades, would, in the long run lead to both a higher level of attendance voluntarily, and to a more broadly educated population that is better prepared for its working life.

One of the vital factors, therefore, in improving the quality of primary schools is to raise the standard of teaching. The most immediate step is to attract better qualified teachers to the municipal schools in the rural and urban areas by offering them higher salaries. The longer term measure is to raise the quality of training given to potential teachers, and increase the number of places in training establishments. There are very few men teachers in primary schools, and therefore this refers exclusively to girls' education, where there is any difference between the two.

In Brazil, all secondary education is divided into two phases, the 'ginasio' which is usually a four year course, and the 'colegio' which lasts another three years. There are three main types of secondary course open to girls. The most numerous, accounting for 80% of all pupils, and the best, and the general secondary schools which approximate to the English grammar school. The 'normal' schools cater specifically for girls wishing to become teachers, and they, together with the commercial schools account equally for the remainder. There is a certain amount of flexibility between the different types at the break between the 'ginasio' and the 'colegio', but the grammar schools provide much the best general education, and anybody with any academic ambition will try to obtain a place at one of them. It is much easier to go from a general 'ginasio' to a specialised 'colegio' than vice versa, although an effort has been made to increase the flexibility and possibilities for changing. The shortage of all forms of secondary education is acute: in the urban areas of the state only 22% of children between the ages of 11 and 18 were receiving any type of secondary education, and in many cases this was only part time. The comparable figure for the whole state in the same year, 1963, was only 19%. The great majority of all secondary schools are still privately run, and the remainder are equally divided between the state and the municipalities.

A girl wishing to become a teacher has two courses open to her on completion of her primary education. If she is bright and ambitious and finishes primary school by the age of eleven or twelve, she will almost certainly aim for a general 'ginasio'. If she is less fortunate or able, she will wait until the age of thirteen, the statutory minimum, and go to the 'ginasio' of a 'normal' school. After four years of whichever she has chosen, she has to make another decision. The ambitious girl will attend the 'colegio' course of the 'normal' school for another three years, even if she went to the general 'ginasio'. The less ambitious and able girl can spend a fifth year in the 'normal ginasio' in which she is taught the elements of teaching techniques and methods, and is then qualified, at the age of eighteen, to go out and teach. In rural areas it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to find a 'normal colegio' within reach, even if it were possible in other ways, and the second type of course is the only possibility.

Unfortunately, a great many practising teachers never had this training, and the shortage of adequately trained teachers is at least as serious as the general shortage of teaching staff. The school census of 1964 analysed the training and qualifications of all primary school teachers in the country. In Pernambuco the following figures show the deplorable state of affairs.

| <u>Qualification</u> | <u>State (excl. Recife)</u> | <u>Recife</u> |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Normal 'school 'galegio' diploma: | 37% | 78% |
| Normal 'school 'ginasio' diploma: | 19 % | 7% |
| Post collegial courses: | 1% | 3% |
| <u>Without 'normal' school diploma</u> | | |
| Completed 'colegio' course:. | 2% | 3% |
| Not completed 'colegio' course: | 2% | 4% |
| Completed 'ginasio' course: | 2% | 1% |
| Not completed 'ginasio' course: | 2% | 1% |
| Completed primary education: | 20% | 2% |
| Not completed primary education: | 15% | 1% |

The most striking fact to emerge from this table and comparison is the difference between the capital and the rest of the state. In Recife all but 4% of the teachers had completed at least one course of some sort of secondary education, and 88% have at least completed the minimum statutory requirement. Outside the city, however, the picture is infinitely worse. Over one third of the teachers have not themselves passed beyond the level up to which they are supposed to be able to teach, and can have had no official training at all, except of the most vicarious sort. There is at present no law preventing anybody who wishes to from setting up a school and teaching, even if they have no qualifications whatsoever. The state is extremely proud of the fact that it has no teachers in its schools who have not at least completed the first part of the 'normal' school. This makes the position even worse in the other types of schools, but it is in fact particularly true of municipally run schools where the staff tend to be relatively badly paid, and therefore to attract the least qualified staff. This may be an economy in the short run, but in the long run it cannot fail to produce worse results. Since the municipal schools constitute such a large proportion, the limitations of the staff present a very serious problem. This is so grave that many of the present teachers are incapable of teaching to the fifth grade since they themselves never reached that level.

In a country where teachers are in very short supply, and which has not the money to afford higher training courses for all teachers, the 'normal' school system itself of both educating and training girls is not at all bad. The state policy of not increasing the number of 'normal' school 'ginasios' but only general 'ginasios' to encourage more girls to have a general education before specializing is preferable, and in the long run should ideally supersede the present system. The most unsatisfactory aspect of the present 'normal' schools is not so much the system as the level of teaching. It is essential that this should be raised as obviously the key to adequate education lies in good teaching. The large proportion of schools not run by the state makes the position more difficult to control, as anybody can set up a 'normal' school without any training. At least, however, the state can set an example. Most of the staff in 'normal' schools have at present received only the training that they then pass on to others. There is very little attempt to modernise the syllabus, and very little initiative is shown in introducing new methods. The circle is

vicious unless some improvement can be imposed from outside.

A start has been made by the Regional Centre for Educational Research in Recife, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Education and Culture, and is therefore a federally supported organisation. This centre, besides carrying out educational and social research, has a department specifically devoted to the 'Aperfeicoamento do Magisterio', translated by them as the 'Division of In-service training for elementary school teachers'. It provides courses and seminars for a few select 'ex-normalistas' and runs an experimental primary school of its own. It has also recently started a series of experimental courses for groups of about 40 teachers from the rural areas of the North East. For six months they are given instruction on how to improve teaching methods in primary schools, and they then return to the country to pass on this information to the other teachers. The scheme has only been in operation for about a year, and obviously such a system is not as good as providing further instruction directly, but the general opinion of those concerned seems to be very favourable. However, it does only touch on the surface, and unless the general level of teaching in 'normal' schools is also improved, the surface will only be scratched, and there can be no multiplier effect. The number of opportunities for teachers to spend some time abroad learning alternative and new methods of teaching is at present much too limited. By increasing the number of foreign scholarships, the standard of teaching in 'normal' schools could be raised considerably in the long run, and the multiplier effect from such an investment would be extremely high.

The problems of education in Brazil are manifest. It is a relatively young country, and it is not surprising that it lacks buildings, teachers, materials, and above all the financial means of remedying the situation in a hurry. However, a series of priorities must be established, and the quantitative aspect not considered exclusively at the expense of the qualitative, as seems to be in danger of happening at the moment. The problem is made the worse by the diversity of organisations responsible and the lack of any central control or planning. The state can at least lead the way even if it cannot dictate standards to the municipalities. It seems to me that the two essentials, and ones that are not unrealistic, are to raise the standard of training in 'normal' schools so that more up to date methods are introduced with a more practical slant, and simultaneously to reduce the number of schools and concentrate on improving the remainder by separating the grades.

Education is not like some forms of investment that show a rapid return. It will be years before the results of a change in the educational system make themselves felt. Brazilian powers that be tend to only be in power for a short time, and in order to retain their position, make investments in spheres that offer a rapid visible return. Therefore they do not make education one of their highest priorities. If the Federal Government and the states were to make an all-out attack upon the problems of education, and were to allocate a much larger proportion of their revenues to this field - at the expense of the armed services, if only this were politically feasible - this would undoubtedly be of immeasurable benefit to the country in the future. Much more effort is needed.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell.

Fanny Mitchell.