The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” What are some core assessments used to inform educational practices in Brazil?

The influence of evidence-based research in the design and implementation of educational policies is a fairly recent phenomenon in Brazil, particularly in the realm of basic education. It is only in 1995, with the deployment of the large scale SAEB—Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica (National System of Assessment of Basic Education)—and the establishment of the National System of Educational Statistics, under the leadership of the federal government, that educational research started to grab the attention of general media and began to play an important role in the mobilization of the civil society and in the policy-making processes.

The SAEB evaluates a sample of students from 5th, 9th, and 12th grades of public and private schools and utilizes a similar methodology to that of the NAEP. The results distinguish averages obtained by each state and compare the performance of public and private schools. The wide dissemination of the results, since the mid-90’s, spurred the development of an “assessment culture” in states and municipalities—the ones directly responsible for the supply and management of basic education (from preschool to high school). A good example of the effects of this process lies in the fact that many states eventually adopted their own systems of performance assessment.

By the end of 2001, twelve Brazilian states had deployed systems of evaluation of their schools. However, there remained a great difficulty in the comprehension and use of results of external assessments. The results of the SAEB were able to generate an accurate diagnosis of how the state systems were fairing, but could not provide much guidance at the school level. As a result, it was extremely tough to establish an effective system of accountability and the majority of the schools could not relate the official results to the day-to-day pedagogical planning.

With the objective to fine-tune the system, the federal government created the Prova Brasil (“Brazil Exam”) in 2005,
an assessment test that adopts the same metric system and methodology of the SAEB to evaluate the realm of public schools with more than 100 students. In 2009, more than 60,000 schools and six million students were assessed. Furthermore, in the attempt to produce an “easy-to-follow and understand” indicator, the Ministry of Education developed the IDEB – Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (Rate of Development of Basic Education), an index that ranges from 0 to 10 and combines the results from the Prova Brasil with student retention rates.

The IDEB establishes annual performance targets for each school, municipality, and state. It is expected that by 2021, Brazilian schools will have reached the average performance levels of the OECD member countries in the PISA. Given the wide dissemination of the results, we know how each Brazilian public school is performing, as well as the student proficiency levels in mathematics and Portuguese measured by the SAEB scale nationwide. Nonetheless, even though the IDEB has positively influenced educational system’s managers and school principals towards a more results-oriented mindset, the problem still remains—most schools have difficulty utilizing the results, do not understand the proficiency scales, or have little or no clue how to improve student performance.

In addition to evaluation systems, there has been a growing interest in investigating the factors associated with the poor performance of the students. Several quantitative and qualitative studies have identified several aspects that help explain the performance of our students—not enough hours spent in the classroom, in general, four hours per day; inefficient use of classroom time; negative effects of high grade-repetition rates; high school attendance at nighttime; not enough teachers for various disciplines, especially math and science; inadequate teacher and principal career structures; teacher absenteeism and turnover; little parental participation; lack of a “homework culture” among students and the classic themes related to outside factors such as low parental educational levels, income level, and access to cultural goods.

The country enjoys several evidences to support educational policies, but the results from assessment exams demonstrate a very slow rate of improvement at primary levels of education and a stagnate performance at the high school level.

In addition to the SAEB, Prova Brasil, and the IDEB, the federal government deployed in 1998 the ENEM – Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (High School National Exam), a voluntary exam that evaluates high school graduates and is widely used today in the selection process for higher education. Evaluation of higher education happens through two different systems: the ENADE–Exame Nacional de Estudantes (National Student Exam), which assesses undergraduate courses, and the post-graduate studies assessment performed by CAPES/MEC, a program of excellence and great academic credibility, the oldest system of educational assessment in Brazil.

**How has Brazilian education changed over the last two decades?**

Brazilian education has gone through profound changes in the last twenty years. To obtain an idea of the magnitude of these changes, in the early nineties, only 90% of children from 7 to 14 years of age were enrolled in school; 22% of 15 to 17 year olds were at the high school level; only 1.6 million students attended university; the students would take on average 12 years to conclude 8th grade; the average grade repetition rate was above 35%; and only 45% of children who entered primary school would complete 8th grade. Things have changed significantly.
Today, 97% of children from 6 to 14 years of age are in school; 50% of youngsters from 15 to 17 are at the High School level; more than 6 million students now attend university. Grade repetition rates, while still very high, has dropped to 17%; graduation rates at the 8th grade level are at 70%; and, 80% of 4 and 5 year olds are in pre-school. There are spots for everyone, but we still have 3.7 million children and youngsters between 4 and 17 years of age outside of school.

These changes are a result of a series of reforms that began in 1995 and have had reasonable continuity in the last few years. In fact, the way the federal government went about their work in education after 1995 departed from past practices. The Ministry of Education started to have a much more effective role in the design and coordination of various strategic actions related to the management of state and municipal educational systems, highly decentralized. In regards to basic education, the government adopted a new funding mechanism, the FUNDEF, which was later on broadened to the FUNDEB, that established a much more equal distribution of resources tied to education. Furthermore, it defined national curriculum guidelines to provide a course of action to state and municipal curriculum, established a program of textbook assessment, and created mechanisms of technical assistance to the poorer states and municipalities.

The most important change in the political-educational action during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, when Paulo Renato Sousa was Minister of Education, was to position basic education as a priority in the reform-agenda. And the adoption of assessment systems at all levels of education to measure the effectiveness of the administrative action was a key component to maintaining education a priority in the political discussion. The continuity of the policies implemented during President Lula’s government, especially in the “assessment arena” and funding of education, allowed a consolidation of the initiatives adopted during the mid-90’s.

Today, given that virtually all children up to 14 years old are in school, given there are spots for all youngsters, and given that the challenge of improving the quality of education is at the center of the national debate, the country has now much more favorable conditions to generate a qualitative “leap.” A considerable number of governors and mayors have been outspoken about their commitments to improving the performance of their students—an agenda that requires focus and perseverance. While the results at the primary level of education are improving, the secondary level of schooling remains stagnant and the dropout rates remain high. The main reason is a lack of interest from the students in what is offered to them—an archaic curriculum, disconnected from the real world.

Consequently, at the center of the debate lies the discussion of the reform at the high school level. Under analysis is a modification of the architecture of the system and the curriculum. The Brazilian high school system follows a “one-path-only” model, overloaded with mandatory academic subjects even for those that opt for a professional/technical degree. Also under debate is the introduction of a mandatory core curriculum in the first years of study, a flexibility of the system with the inclusion of elective disciplines, and a greater articulation and integration of the academic education to the technical/professional one. Truth is, however, nobody knows what to do with the high school level and game-changing proposals are still timid and often times, badly designed.
What changes is Brazil making to its education system to ensure more equitable access to higher education?

Higher education has been the fastest growing sector over the last ten years. This expansion has mainly been a reflection of the growth in the supply from the private sector—today it accounts for 75% of total enrollment. More than 70% of higher education is offered at night-time, comprised by students who work and pay to study. The best universities are public (free tuition), and mostly receive students coming from the top private high schools. The adoption of the PROUNI—Programa Universidade para Todos (Program University for All), a initiative started during Lula’s government that awards full and partial academic scholarships (to private universities) to low-income or special needs students, has contributed to more equitable access to post-secondary education. Currently, around 700,000 students are benefiting from PROUNI.

However, enrollment in higher education is substantially lower in Brazil than in developed countries or even in countries at a similar stage of development. In our case, the point of inflection occurs before the Vestibular (entry-door exam to most of the universities). Poor primary education quality combined with elevated grade repetition rates lead to high dropout rates at the high school level. Since 2005, the number of high school graduates has remained consistent at 1.8 million. Therefore, many of the challenges we observe at the higher level of education will only be solved with an improvement of basic education.

On top of that, there are high dropout rates at the university level—close to 40% at the public system and 50% at the private system. The number of university graduates has not increased in proportion to the increase in enrollment. The private system is reaching its growth limit due to lack of students able to pay tuition. As the number of students able to pay tuition is exhausted, the State will need to expand its funding to the private sector via educational credits for students and through expansion of programs such as PROUNI. However, the quality filters must be expanded too to ensure that students receiving scholarships are receiving quality higher education.

What is your vision for Brazilian education in the 21st century?

Any forward-looking vision must prioritize improvement of basic education quality, expansion of technical and technological education, and internationalization of higher education, particularly in strategic areas related to sustainable development. Above all, the biggest challenge is to improve the quality of education of students ages 4 to 17.

The central problem in Brazil today is the extremely low quality of education at the primary and secondary levels: according to the national assessments, at the end of 5th grade, only 35% of children are fully literate in reading, writing, and basic concepts of mathematics; only 26% of 8th grade students have reached an adequate level of performance in Portuguese; at the end of high school, only 10% of students have mastered the expected skills and competencies in mathematics. In PISA, Brazil is among the ten worst countries, coming behind Mexico and Chile. In short, our students learn little and without a massive investment in basic education it will be impossible to secure a complete social and economical development of the country.

It is true that the low educational levels of parents and social inequalities are some of the main factors that explain the poor performance of Brazilian students. However,
there still are internal aspects in schools that negatively affect learning.

Our students spend very little time in school, on average, four hours a day, insufficient time to comply with the prescribed curriculum. About 40% of high school students study during nighttime, because there are no vacancies during daytime. Our teachers are not equipped to interpret the results of the performance assessments and to introduce the necessary changes in the classroom. The teacher careers are unattractive, and the best students do not feel motivated to follow it.

In addition to the low investment in basic education, we also lack a motivated, well trained, and well paid teaching force. The good news is that the growth in the investment in education—in 2010 was equivalent to 5% of the GDP—and state and municipal level meritocratic initiatives are providing incentives for teachers. Some states such as São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Ceará, and the municipality of Rio de Janeiro have deployed meritocratic policies that award bonuses based on teacher performance and on whether the schools can achieve their annual performance targets. However, resistances from unions have led to strikes that weaken the executive power. Another difficulty is the resistance of universities to make changes to their initial teacher training courses, in general, highly theoretical and distant from the school level.

The wide dissemination of the IDEB results and of the performance targets for all Brazilian public schools is starting to have an impact on local educational policy decisions. Some states and municipalities are prioritizing specific actions focused on improving student performance. These are important long-term public policy changes. It is possible to observe a greater commitment from states and municipalities to invest in the classrooms, extension of the school-day, in-service teacher training, structured teaching materials, and pedagogical assistance to schools. There is also a great emphasis on expansion of the pre-school level.

The next steps of this new agenda are clear: a renewal of the initial teacher training and a career based on merit; investment in quality pre-school education; reformulation of the high school level and an articulation of professional qualifications; expansion of the technical and technological courses and of universities that equip our youth to face the challenges of this century. These, as we all know, demand new skills from the work force, mastery of reading and writing, basic concepts of mathematics, knowledge of a foreign language, capacity to handle new information technologies, and a scientific education that teaches students to think and comprehend the world around them.

There is nothing too audacious in this agenda. What we have is a firm conviction that the hardest and most important thing to do is to do what is simple, to do what is basic. A basic education of good quality that absorbs the entire population that should be in school is a necessary condition to make the country more just and decent, a true democracy. An education offered by better paid teachers with a mindset that climbing the career ladder should be tied to merit and with a conviction that contemporary life in a plural society requires practicality and preservation of values.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

Big steps were taken in the last twenty years to improve education in Brazil. The next educational policy agenda is harder to
materialize, especially because it is less visible; it will take longer and does not propitiate immediate results (a common concern for many politicians during election periods). The big challenge is to increase the rhythm of change. Brazil does not have a choice anymore. It is education or education!

Today, the most positive influence in demanding changes in the Brazilian education is the significant mobilization of the civil society and of the media outlets in favor of quality education. Movements from NGO’s and associations—Todos Pela Educação, Parceiros da Educação, Comunidade Educativa—and of various institutes funded by private foundations—Instituto Unibanco, Itaú Social, Fundação Victor Civita, Fundação Lemann, Fundação Roberto Marinho, Instituto Ayrton Senna, Instituto Natura—have developed several studies and school-intervention projects to improve the quality of public schools. The media outlet, the general press, and other channels of mass communication, highlight education as one the biggest themes in national campaigns. That is the newest aspect of the Brazilian education.

At the government level, in addition to the leading role of the federal government, there are other important movements taking place. The Board of State Secretaries of Education (CONSED) and of the Municipal Secretaries of Education (UNDIME) has been gaining force in the articulation of bills and drafts. Governors and mayors are starting to deploy courageous reforms that are often times deemed as unpleasant. Various scientific associations, raising a flag to demand more from the higher level of education, are also beginning to pressure the government for better quality in basic education. The legislative power organizes debates about the reforms but continues to be susceptible to the agenda of the unions and corporations. The judicial power is starting to get noticed in the defense of the right to a quality education.

Parents continue to represent the big absence from the process. According to opinion surveys, most parents remain satisfied with the education of their children in part because there is universal access, school lunch, books, and their kids already have more schooling than past generations. The biggest challenge is to convince parents and teacher unions about the urgency of the new educational reform agenda. The problem of education in Brazil is politics, not policies. We know the problems and what to do to improve quality in education, but the implementation of the new agenda depends on our capacity to convince parents, unions, and strategic decision-makers.

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