

Executive summary

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the social and economic development which Brazil achieved over recent decades had stalled and gone into reverse. Against that background, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened economic recession, and has hit hardest on those least able to cope with the downturn, exacerbating inequalities that still place Brazil among the more unequal countries globally (see Chapter 1). Education, the topic of this report, has played a big part in Brazil's progress, and has the potential to support the country's recovery. Drawing on the extensive range of data available, and the experience of OECD and comparable countries, this report examines the challenges faced by Brazil in improving the *quality* and *equity* of education while also addressing the immediate demands from the COVID-19 crisis.

Participation in education has expanded, but is still far from reaching OECD levels, and significant disparities remain

In the last few decades, Brazil has dramatically enhanced the participation of children and young people, closing the gap, at least in some respects, with high-performing countries. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been expanded, enrolment in primary education is close to universal, and around 80% of the cohort participate in lower secondary education (see Chapter 2), with well over half now progressing to upper secondary education. Tertiary participation has also grown, and access enhanced for the most disadvantaged. Despite major advances, attainment and participation is still behind the OECD average. Moreover, disadvantaged individuals face barriers both in accessing and remaining in education. As a result, levels of attainment and participation in education vary significantly across Brazil's population. While socio-economic background and regional differences are factors in all systems, their impacts are stronger in Brazil than in many comparable countries. Moreover, a large proportion of young people does not complete education on time or at all. This is the result of a number of factors, including grade repetition and a disengaging curricula. Some students also abandon education to look for a job or take over caring responsibilities at home. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further encouraged this trend, especially among the most disengaged and disadvantaged.

Ensuring quality education for all remains a key challenge for Brazil

Evidence from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that growth in education participation in Brazil has been realised alongside some improvements in learning outcomes (see Chapter 3). While this is a remarkable achievement, student performance remains well behind OECD and comparable countries. Half of the 15-year-olds in Brazil lack a baseline level of proficiency in reading, compared with only about one in five in OECD countries on average. Furthermore, Brazil's education system does not offer a level playing field for children and young adults. Students' social and economic background, including race, has a significant impact on learning outcomes. Students from less well-off backgrounds do not have the same opportunities as their better-off peers and tend to attend lower-quality schools. This damages their life chances, as measured by their employment status and earnings, both

reflecting and compounding inequalities in the country. Prolonged school closures and distance learning models put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic may also lead to learning losses, in particular among disadvantaged students.

Ensuring that resources are effectively used and equitably distributed can support learning

The Brazilian government spends a large share of the national income on education. In 2017, public spending on education institutions comprised 5.1% of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product, compared with 4.3% in Latin American countries and 4.0% in OECD countries (see Chapter 4). Despite increases in education spending over the years, Brazil has only seen limited improvements in national and international assessments. To sustain and accelerate progresses in teaching and learning, Brazil will need to retain current levels of education resources. However, there is also significant scope to use resources more equitably and effectively. For example, at present, Brazil invests more in tertiary education than in ECEC, despite evidence that access to high-quality ECEC not only contributes to better learning outcomes but can also help reduce inequalities. Even within tertiary education, funding arrangements tend to disproportionately benefit students from advantaged backgrounds.

Supporting teachers and school leaders can help enhance educational outcomes

It is widely acknowledged that two of the most important factors in determining the success of an educational system are teachers and school leaders. For the most part, the teaching profession fails to attract able young entrants in Brazil: teacher salaries are lower than for other tertiary-educated careers, the profession is not socially valued, and part-time contracts of limited duration are unattractive. Selection measures are not always effective in selecting highly-qualified candidates. Initial teacher education is weak and provides limited emphasis on practical skills leaving many teachers unprepared for the classroom. Once on-the-job, teachers receive limited support to improve their practice. Brazilian teachers rarely benefit from systematic induction, and often face obstacles to participation in continuous professional development opportunities. While teacher appraisal is common, many of the key elements of a structured teacher appraisal system are lacking. The school leadership role is particularly under-developed in Brazil, relative to OECD and high-performing countries. Brazil's school leaders rarely have postgraduate qualifications. Selection processes for school leaders remain unstructured and often political. Evidence points to shortcomings in access to and provision of training (see Chapter 5).

A greater focus on students' behaviour, expectations and well-being is needed

On several measures, the well-being and life chances of Brazilian children have clearly improved. However, significant issues remain, and new challenges have emerged, many of which are linked to the COVID-19 crisis (Chapter 6). National and international evidence point to some key education challenges that need to be addressed. Student misbehaviour and disruption in the classroom are common and take time away from actual learning. Furthermore, relationships within schools are strained and, at times, hostile. This creates an unsafe environment where students feel little connection, which in combination with a disengaging curricula, encourages student truancy, dropout and underperformance. While there is growing recognition of the importance of well-being, many aspects of psychological, social and physical health remain overlooked by school networks, schools and teachers. Lack of access to basic material and educational resources at home can be a barrier for learning, in particular for disadvantaged students. Once again, the COVID-19 crisis and the move to distance learning has amplified this issue, as home support becomes doubly vital during school closures.



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