

Brazil's 'lost decade' in education, 1985-94: How to account for the lack of reform in the New Republic?

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Abstract

Brazil's education system is seen as having undergone substantial reform since 1995, ten years after the country returned to democracy. What were the reasons for the delay in reform during this 'lost decade' in education between 1985 and 1994? The paper identifies the reasons, including the educational legacy left by the outgoing military regime (including commitments it was unable to achieve, distortions in its spending allocation and the relative absence of control over the private sector); the political instability of the New Republic's first governments and increasing decentralisation of its political institutions; and the development of the education sector as an increasingly politicised arena of contestation between Left and Right, which would persist into the reform period after 1995. The paper concludes by questioning whether this cycle of political instability and contestation in education has reached an end with the entry of the PT into government in 2003.

The decade after 1982 is usually characterised as Brazil's 'lost decade' in economic terms. Compared to the high levels of economic growth during the early 1970s, the military regime's state-led model of development began to flag in the latter part of the decade before becoming unstuck in the wake of the debt crisis. The economic slowdown coupled with rising political dissatisfaction of the regime contributed to a pacted democratic transition in 1985 in which the military removed themselves from power in favour of their political allies on the Right, known as the New Republic.

Even if the new democracy did not promise an immediate break with the economic direction of the past, it did appear to augur new political and social rights through the 1988 constitution. Rights that had been previously granted on the basis of employment in the formal sector became universal, including in social security, education and health. Yet the achievement of these rights did not lead to immediate benefits across Brazilian society. While they existed on paper, the governing elite failed to effect the changes necessary to make good the promises laid out. The result was arguably a 'lost decade' for social policy in Brazil; and nowhere was this starker than in education, where substantial reforms did not begin until the mid-1990s under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. These include key changes in the curricular guidelines, constitutional responsibilities for education, improved pay and working conditions for teachers and national forms of evaluation and performance.

If these changes only occurred after 1995, what could account for the relative lack of reform during the New Republic's first decade? Why did Brazil's newly democratic and legitimate elite fail to introduce the kinds of policies that would make the commitments laid out in the 1988 constitution effective? Using the case study of education, this paper examines the constraints that the country's governments faced in delivering reform. In particular it highlights the key obstacles presented by during the first ten years of the New Republic in the educational sector. These include the educational legacy left by the outgoing military regime (including commitments it was unable to achieve, distortions in its spending allocation and the relative absence of control over the private sector); the political instability of the New Republic's first governments and increasing decentralisation of its political institutions; and the development of the education sector as an increasingly politicised arena of contestation, which would persist into the reform period after 1995. Arguably this last point is the main legacy of Brazil's 'lost decade' in education, by lasting into the

reform period during the Cardoso government. The paper then concludes by questioning whether the entry of the PT into government has begun to weaken politicisation in the educational sphere (as well as others) and arguably contributing towards a 'normalisation' of public policy debate in Brazil.

1. The military's educational legacy

The military's educational legacy to Brazil in 1985 was contradictory: while it had overseen a substantial increase in coverage at all levels of education – primary, secondary and tertiary – it was a system that was in both financial crisis and without adequate means of control. This legacy owed much to three main factors: one, the continuing political link between the military regime and its democratic successor; two, the regime's distorted financial priorities in education; three, the relative failure of new financial mechanisms to assist the regime's educational goals; and four, a relative absence of control over the private sector expansion of educational provision.

First, the departure of the military regime in Brazil did not represent an abrupt change from either its successors in the New Republic. The military regime had its origins in a coalition between the armed forces and prominent sections among the economic, political and social elites (Green 2003; Alimonda 1984; Levine 1979). Viewing leftist threats from all parts, the regime began to reverse the relatively decentralised political system then in operation, by centralising control and reducing the power of other political actors; Congress was initially closed, elected state governors replaced by appointed ones and all political party activity banned. This approach was subsequently loosened to allow limited participation, although only through the two officially sanctioned parties allowed: the government ARENA party and the opposition MDB (Skidmore 1988). However, the regime went through periods of repression and relative tolerance throughout its 21 years. This indicated a regime that oscillated between moderate and hard-line tendencies (Cammack 1991). But the tension between moderates and hardliners was always more stylistic than substantial, since the underlying theme under each remained the same: the regime would brook only limited dissent.

The regime was a largely conservative coalition in its economic and social policies. It identified with the political Right, justifying its actions in 1964 on the grounds of communist

subversion. Its defence of conservative interests was apparent in the moral tone it sought to impose on Brazilian society (and in the nature of the moral and civic education requirement that it introduced in schools and universities) and the pursuance of the prevailing state-led model of capitalist development. Alongside its support of the private sector (including state support), it also maintained the previous regime's entitlement model, which ensured rights such as social security and pensions to those who were employed within the formal sector. During the first part of the regime this approach appeared to yield substantial dividends in the form of an 'economic miracle' by the early 1970s. Furthermore, with the assumption of increasingly moderate leaders from the mid-1970s on, including a process of liberalisation or 'abertura' under the Geisel (1975-79) and Figueiredo (1979-85) governments, the Brazilian regime was relatively benign when compared to that of other military governments in the region.

The armed forces-elite relationship which underpinned the regime began to ebb towards the latter during this more moderate phase from the late 1970s on. The 'abertura' coincided with rising political dissatisfaction, both within the elite and wider society about the limited degree of participation viable under the system. The situation was exacerbated in 1982 by the debt crisis, which directly challenged the generals' claims to competent government. During the first part of the 1980s Brazil was subject to widespread protests and challenges against the regime from all quarters. The armed forces' position was undermined; by 1985 they were ready to leave the stage. In their place the new democracy that had emerged remained in the control of the coalitions' other main partners: the military's political allies. Such circumstances made some degree of policy continuation more likely. This was especially so in the commitment to the military regime's development model, which remained largely state-led until the end of the 1980s.

Second, the military regime's development model was largely distorted in its outcomes. This was especially apparent in the particularistic way that it dispensed social benefits, including in education. Between 1964 and 1985 the number of primary school students had more than doubled to 24.77m and those in secondary education had grown six-fold to 3.02m in the 21 years of the dictatorship, compared to the 1.37m students in higher education in 1985 (IBGE, various issues). The regime stated that it aimed to increase the amount of skilled labour, which would require improvements in primary education and an equal distribution of funds across primary,

secondary and tertiary modalities (MacNeill 1970). At first glance this seemed viable: the 1982 debt crisis did not appear to have unduly affected the resources available for public spending education. While the proportion allocated by the regime on education by the federal government had declined from 11.1% in 1965 to 5.3% in 1975, during the late-1970s and 1980s it had risen, to 7.2% in 1980 and 9.3% in 1985 (IBGE, various issues).

However, underneath these overarching figures, the military's educational priorities were skewed. The division of educational responsibility in Brazil's political system meant that the bulk of federal government spending was concentrated in higher education rather than in primary and secondary education, which were responsible for primary and secondary education. The fact that the regime had introduced greater centralisation of control had an untoward effect on education: while primary and secondary education suffered, the main beneficiary of government spending became higher education. Furthermore, the allocation of central government spending meant that it was students from the wealthier sections of society, who dominated higher education. Indeed, spending on primary and secondary education declined throughout the military period (Figure 1), despite the fact that by 1985 90% of students were in primary education compared to just 1% in higher education (IADB 1993). Indeed, concern with primary education – insofar as it may be measured by spending priorities – only became pressing towards the end of the regime, in the late 1970s. Indeed, additional data suggests that by 1985 the amount spent by the central government on primary education had risen to a similar amount to that in higher education (Brown 2002). Meanwhile the big loser, in terms of federal/central funds, was secondary education; its share of resources fell throughout the regime. This was especially problematic, since a 1971 educational law made vocational education obligatory in all secondary schools; yet there was no way of ensuring that this could be implemented. The result was its repeal in 1982 (Niskier 2007).

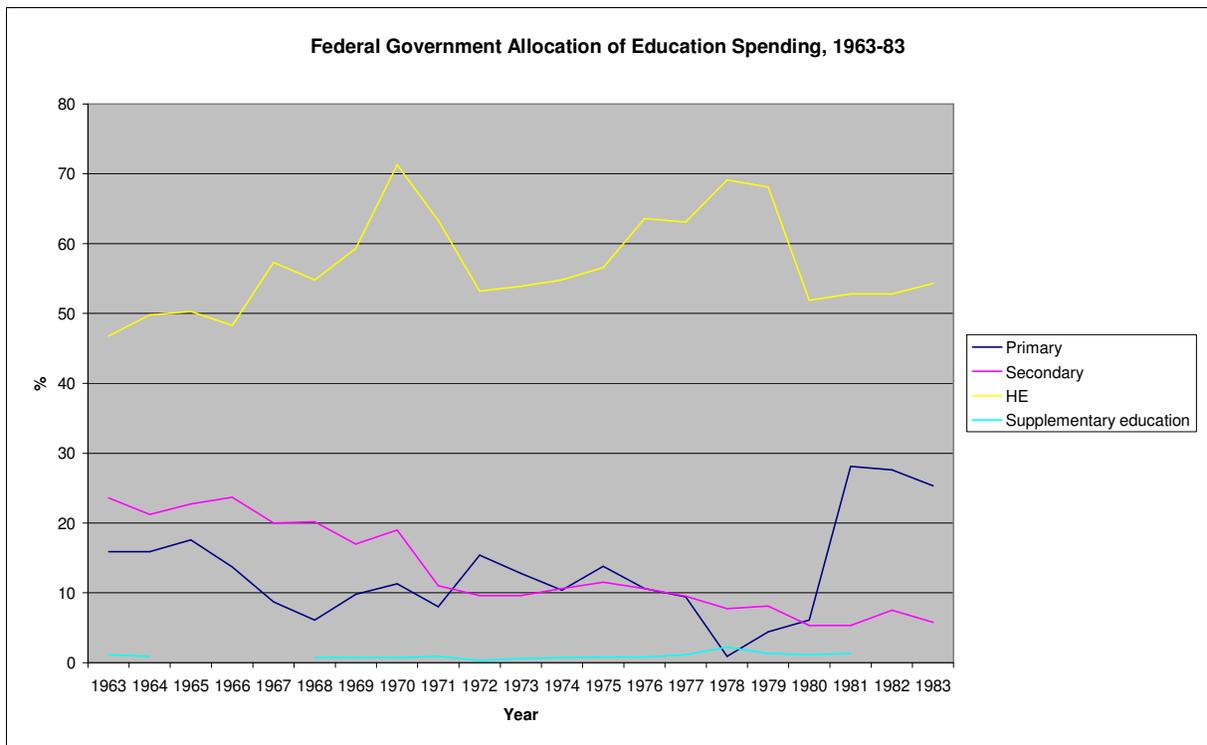


Figure 1

Sources: IBGE, 1960-85

Third, in response to the structure of educational responsibility between the federal, state and municipal levels, the regime sought to resolve the financial crisis in primary and secondary education through the introduction of a new funding mechanism to support increased investment in primary education. This became known as the *salário-educação* and was introduced during the regime's first year in 1964 (MEC/INEP 1965; Neves 1992). However, it was incapable of providing an adequate solution, not least because of the lack of municipal involvement in educational finance and the failure to redirect funds away from richer states (Neves 1992). Furthermore, the *salário-educação*'s worth was questionable, owing to its fluctuating and inconsistent value (Figure 2). Despite an increase in value of 29.5% between 1974 and 1977, by 1980 it was worth 86.5% of its 1974 value and 64.9% in 1984 (IPEA 1987).

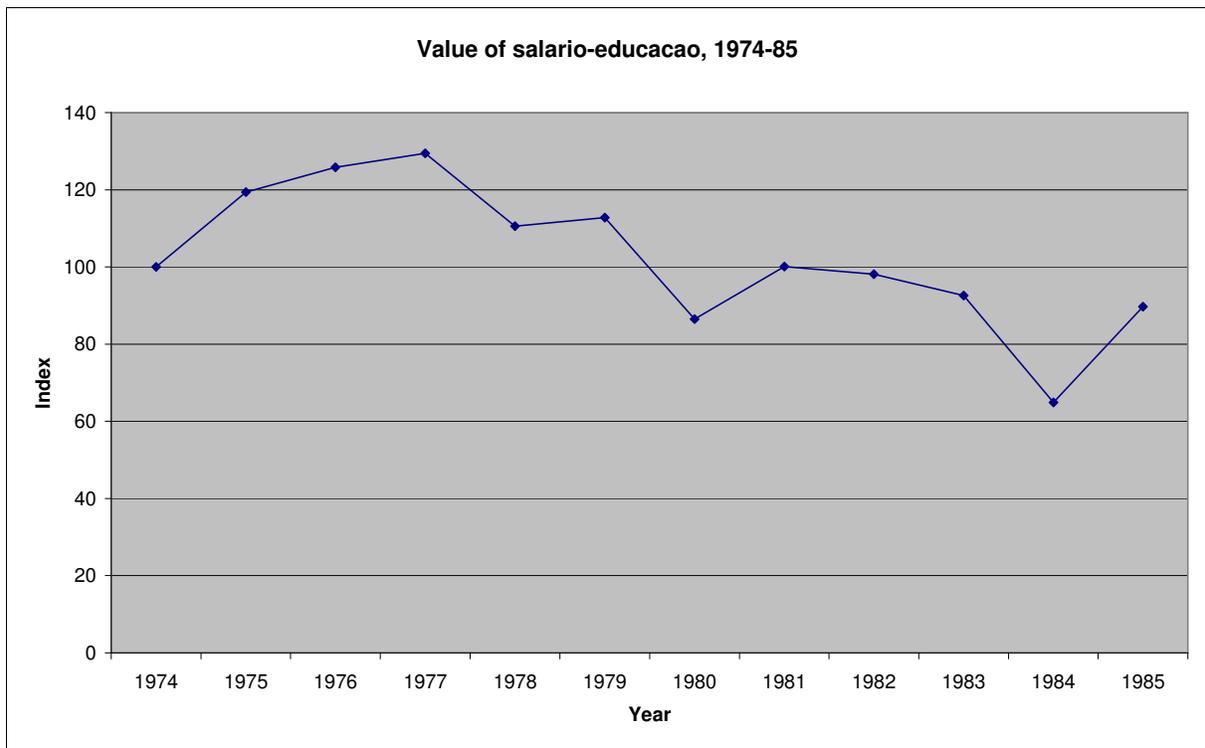


Figure 2

Source: IPEA 1987

Fourth, alongside the *salário-educação*, the regime also made use of the private sector to assist with their education plans. Increasing the number of primary and secondary (as well as higher) education institutions might be achieved by encouraging greater involvement by the private sector. The military-introduced 1967 constitution maintained an obligation on forms to provide primary education while the private sector contributed to a rising proportion of schools in the secondary and higher education sectors (Brazil 1967; Brown 2002; IBGE, various issues). However, much of this growth was achieved at the expense of adequate regulation, evaluation and supervision; the result was an increasing section of the Brazilian education system which incorporated a growing number of students at all levels that was of poor quality and performance (Schwartzmann, interview, 2007; Souza 2005; BANAS 1974 – p. 137 in green).

2. Political instability and uncertain education funding in the first decade of the New Republic (1985-94)

The educational legacy left by the departing military regime in 1985 presented a challenge to the first governments of the New Republic. On the one hand the military had overseen an increase in the size of the educational system at all levels: there were 1.36m teachers at all levels and 31.65m students from pre-school to higher education level, the vast bulk of which (78%) were in primary school and 4% in higher education (IBGE 1987/88; 2003). In the first ten years of the New Republic the number of primary school students rose to 32.7m while those in secondary education increased from 3.02m to 5.37m students and teachers at all levels in 1998 stood at 1.98m (IBGE 1999; 2003). On the other, the distortions in educational funding meant that the bulk of federal government spending went to the smaller higher educational section, which was also complemented by considerable – and relatively uncontrolled – private sector institutions.

Notwithstanding the situation, the first New Republic governments were unable to address these issues. This was due mainly to the instability regarding these governments generally during the first decade of democracy and the persistence of distortions within education spending coupled with decentralisation of Brazil's political institutions after 1985. Before taking office, the president-elect, Tancredo Neves, died; he was succeeded by his vice-president, José Sarney, who was a political supporter of the old regime. Sarney sought to kick-start the state-led development approach, including the use of protectionist and central planning measures (Font 2004; Spanakos 2004; Moura 1993), while his successor, Fernando Collor de Mello, opted for a more free-market, neo-liberal model to revive the Brazilian economy, including the use of privatisations of state assets, deregulation and the reduction in the size of the state generally (Coes 1995; Longon 1993). The process looked to have reached a premature end with his resignation on corruption charges, although the course was maintained under his vice-president, Itamar Franco, who saw out the remainder of his term. The end of the first decade was notable for the introduction of the Real Plan, which not only brought an end to inflation and contributed to economic stabilisation in Brazil; it also delivered the 1994 presidential election to his finance minister, Cardoso.

Brazil's economic and financial situation after 1985 was reflected in the government's funds for education. As it had been under the military regime, the model remained skewed in several

ways. First, the amount allocated by the federal government to education generally suffered a decline, falling from 13.3% to 2.9% between 1989 and 1990 (Figure 3). This was arguably – and paradoxically – due to the neo-liberal direction of the governments after 1989, which cut the amount allocated to social services while increasing the proportion spent on reforming the state (administration and planning).

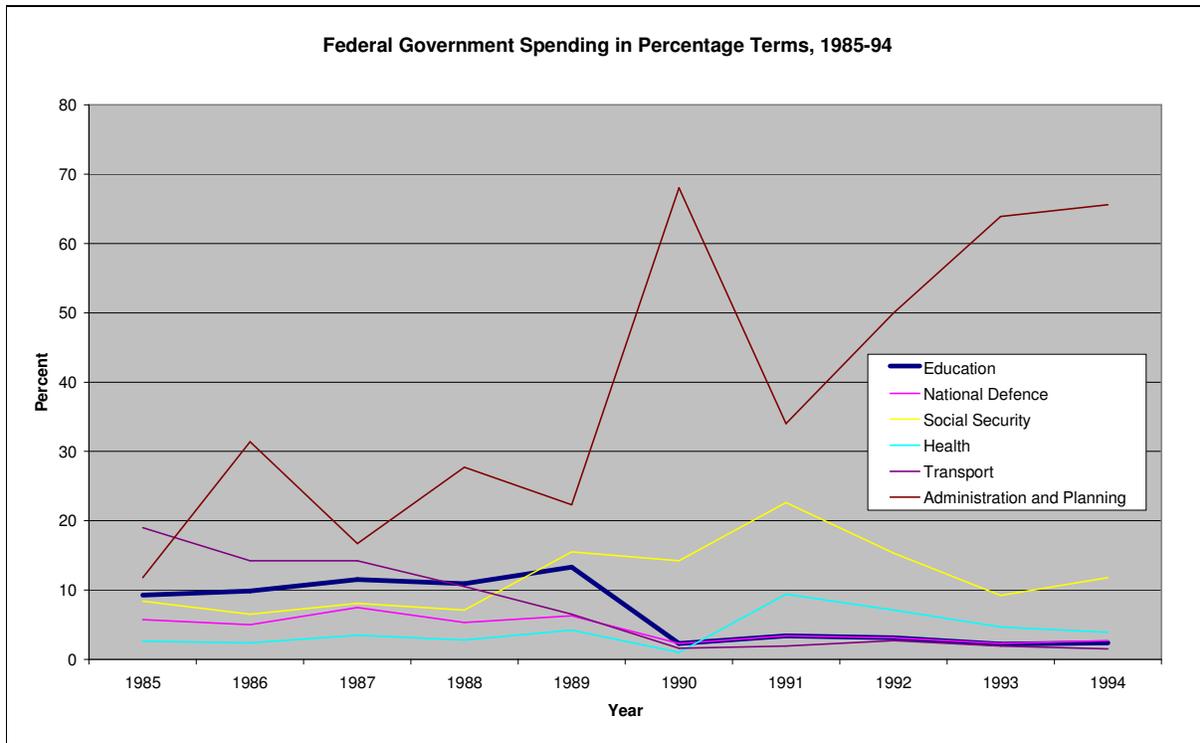


Figure 3

Source: IBGE, various years

Second, within education spending government allocations continued to prioritise those in higher income groups, mainly through the greater amount allocated to higher education over that of other educational modalities. By 1990 the wealthiest sectors of society, which accounted for 50% of university students, reaped the main benefit of federal government expenditure (FIESP 1990). This was more evident generally across spending in education at all (federal, state and municipal) levels, with those in higher income groups receiving proportionally more public funding; while 27% of the population who came from households earning more than two minimum salaries received 34% of education spending, this compared favourably to the 44% spent on the half of the population (51%) of households earning under a minimum salary (IPEA 1996). Such retrogressive

public spending made sense in the context of these first New Republic governments' bases: despite the democratic transition in 1985, their support constituted those same sectors of society that had formed part of the coalition under the military, including the political and economic elites.

Third, alongside the neo-liberal shift and the legacy of greater higher education spending, the first New Republic governments' educational spending was challenged by a combination of a new political reality coupled with the persistence of discretionary funds for other, non-higher education modalities. While the military regime had been relatively insulated from social and political demands, this did not extend to its successors. It had operated a controlled form of electoral representation, though it was invariably subject to manipulation of the electoral rules. By contrast the new democracy after 1985 had no such means of control; politicians were once again in charge and subject to competing demands from their constituents. The result was an increase in the level of 'pork-barrel' politics, with politicians seeking to enhance their ability to access state funds for their constituencies. This was most evident in the nature of educational policy under Collor. Notwithstanding the government's neo-liberal image, Collor's priority was in the construction of new schools and infrastructure in the urban periphery through the construction of integrated school and community centres, or CIACs (Goldemberg 1993; interview, 2008; Henrique 1993). But given the discretionary nature of the programme, its funding was subject to competing political demands; the result was an uncertain and insecure budget (Goldemberg, interview, 2008).

In addition to growing politicisation in Congress, the New Republic governments were faced with a similar process occurring at the sub-national level as well. Whereas the military had centralised power across all policy areas, governments after 1985 were relatively powerless to maintain this model, with increasing decentralisation and demands among the features of the Brazilian political system in this period (Medici and Maciel 1996; Neubauer da Silva and Cruz 1996; NEPP 1988; Abrahão de Castro 1996). Coupled with competing political demands at the local level, spending on those modalities for which states and municipalities had responsibility – the primary and secondary levels – were uncontrolled, resulting in a general decline for spending for these forms at all levels; between 1986 and 1991 state spending on primary education fell by a third while that by municipalities dropped by 40% (Figure 4).

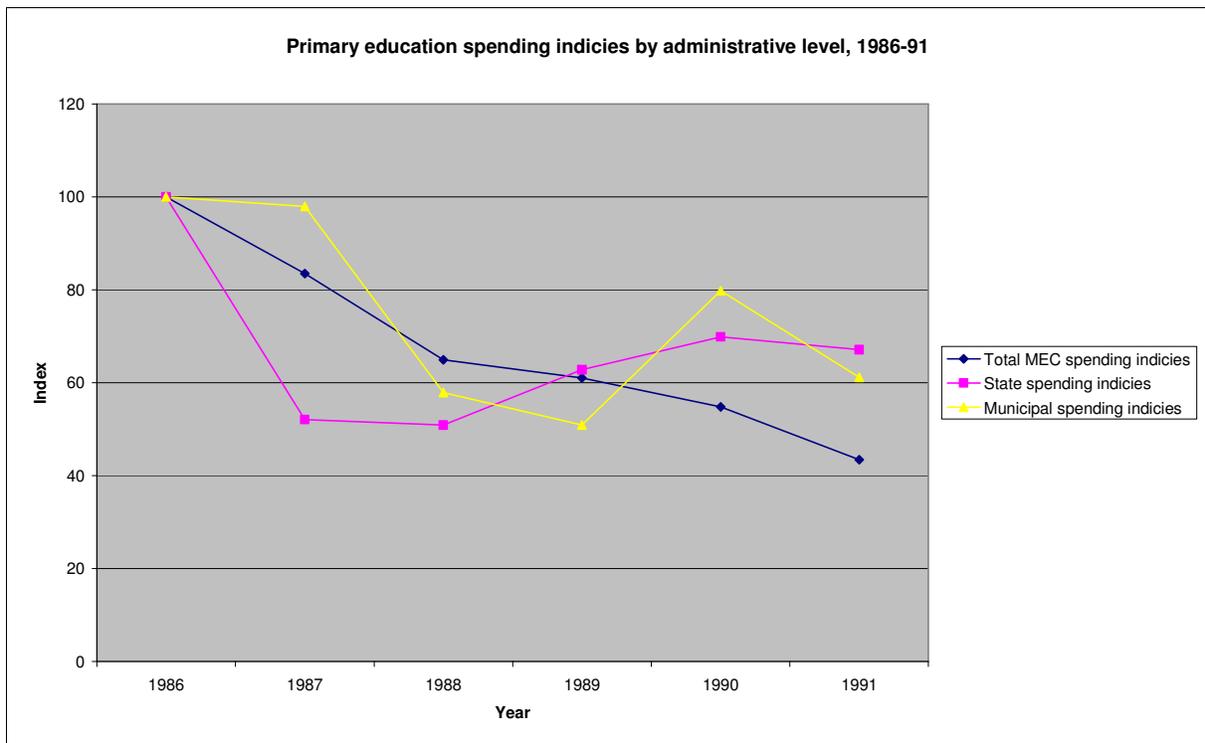


Figure 4

Source: Sobrinho 1994

The effect of the relatively weak and financially insecure nature of Brazilian education generally meant limited funds available to develop and improve the system. Alongside the uncertainty of sufficient funds to build new infrastructure, this was also apparent in the limited assistance towards teachers' working and pay conditions as well. Indeed, this would be one of the main priorities of the incoming Cardoso government in 1995, the result of which was the creation of a constitution amendment that created a new fund, FUNDEF, that guaranteed resources to assist primary education: 18% of federal and 25% of state and municipal tax revenue would be allocated to education, with 60% of those revenues being directed to teachers' salaries (Levačić and Downes 2004).

In addition to limited public funds for education, the New Republic governments continued to support the private sector in educational provision. But whereas private provision had been substantial during the military period, it did not yield any notable changes during the New Republic's first decade. This was no doubt due in part to the economic difficulties faced by the sector in the period. Between 1985 and 1994 there were slight reductions in the number of private secondary and higher education institutions with only a small increase in the number of private

primary schools (IBGE, various issues). Indeed, notwithstanding the neo-liberal direction of the Collor presidency, Goldemberg observed that there was no overt effort to encourage the private sector at the higher education level, mainly because the bulk of students were already catered within that sector (interview, 2008).

3. Opposition from education actors: political and corporatist demands

Beyond the political instability of the New Republic's first three governments, the growing decentralised power of Brazil's sub-national political institutions and the related impact that these factors had on the financial condition of the educational system, the first decade of democracy saw the New Republic challenged by rising dissatisfaction among the wider educational community, such as social movements associated with teachers and students. Although this did not sufficiently undermine the political system, it did in one instance contribute to the resignation of Collor from the presidency. While they individually remained relatively limited in their capacity to influence educational policy, where they did present a challenge was in their association and identification with a prominent political opposition movement on the Left. The result was to make education an area of political contestation that would persist into the reform period under Cardoso.

Generally, the demands of teachers and (mainly university) students were concerned with improving the financial situation in education. For students this meant greater access to more grants and assistance; to teachers this meant improvements in their pay and working conditions. Although the teachers' union (CPB, subsequently CNTE) leadership was dealt with the framing of educational rights and responsibilities within the 1988 constitution, including the form of participation to be used to represent social movement demands in the constituent assembly and greater central funds for education, they were also concerned with improvements to their working conditions, salaries and pension rights (Brasil 1988; Neubauer da Silva and Cruz 1996; CPB 1987b). These latter points became the main point of government-union relations over the course of the decade, prompted by a decline in teachers' salaries comparable to other public sector workers and contributing to national protests and strikes in favour of a national minimum salary (CPB 1986; CPB 1987a). Meanwhile, the student movement was particularly prominent in the moral protest against corruption that was generated by the scandal surrounding Collor in 1992

(Boren 2001). The first protest, involving 10,000 students, took place in São Paulo in August, following several months of media campaigning. The protests gained momentum, attracting wider support in society, although the students remained the most visible group within it. Despite their influence though, the movement did not last beyond the president's resignation; by 1993 student mobilisation was once again low.

Both movements recognised their own limitations: the teachers' union leadership noted a relative lack of regional unity, common dialogue and strategy among its constituent union members at state level (CNTE 1990). University and secondary school students were similarly weakly organised; notwithstanding their role as an opposition force during the latter stages of the military regime and once again during the Collor scandal, in the late 1980s and after 1992 it was less politically active or ideologically motivated (Costa 1996; Mische 1997). Increasingly, the concerns of students were primarily work-based, owing to the economic difficulties faced by society in this period.

Despite the relatively weak position of these movements, their demands (with the exception of the Collor protests) were largely characterised as 'corporatist' by those involved in the formulation and development of educational policy (Goldemberg, interview, 2008; Souza 2005; Souza, interview, 2007; Schwartzmann, interview, 2007). Corporatism is understood here as those demands which are particularistic rather than universal in nature and concerned primarily with the welfare and benefit of a given community, in this case those of teachers and students, rather than the wider educational system as a whole. The association of these demands and 'corporatism' tends to be presented in a negative fashion and generally distinguishes the political position of the commentator from that of the actor. Admittedly, this narrow interpretation of the motivations of educational social movements overlooks the work of other groups which sought to construct alternative forms of education rather than simply challenging government policy. This included the MST and its schools during this period.

Even if a distinction is drawn between the types of activity undertaken by the educational social movements themselves, a broader separation lay between them and the first New Republic governments regarding their political opinions and outlooks. While the first New Republic governments were largely associated and identified with the political Right, initially through social

and economic conservatives under Sarney and subsequently social conservatives and economic liberals under Collor (and Franco to a lesser extent), the teacher and student movements, along with NGOs and professionals in the educational field, tended to identify with the Left generally and the main opposition political party, the PT, in particular (Cunha 1995). Indeed, despite the relative weakness of the movements individually, the leaderships of both the teacher and student movements were largely dominated by PT and other leftist activists, including the communists. When coupled with other left-leaning social movements, these educational actors played a key role in the development of the PT as the main political (and educational) alternative in challenging the nature of the conservative transition to democracy by the outgoing military regime and its political allies. In education this was similarly the case: by the end of the New Republic's first decade, whereas (social democratic) reformers such as Cardoso were associated with merely seeking to improve the planning and effectiveness of the education system, those associated with the PT were seen in a more radical light. In particular this would involve the use of education in a more political fashion, to construct citizenship and transform the nature of Brazilian society (Gracindo 1995).

Conclusion

By 1995 the educational system in Brazil was in need of a long and overdue reform. Following the 1988 constitution steps had been taken to introduce new, more detailed national education guidelines. After several years the resulting document reflected the involvement of the new Brazilian democracy: it contained 298 articles and 1263 amendments (Ramal 1997). The various proposals never reached the voting stage in Congress: they were supplanted by a new, shorter and less detailed proposal presented by the new Cardoso government that took office in 1995. Cardoso had made education one of his key priorities during the 1994 presidential election and appointed his manifesto co-ordinator and close political ally, Paulo Renato Souza, to the post of education minister. Over the following four years key reforms would be enacted through a constitutional amendment to address the financing of primary education and teachers and measures to introduce evaluative mechanisms at both school and university level and national curricular guidelines among others.

Why the reform period had taken so long to take effect owed much to the new political realities faced by the first governments after democracy's return in 1985. They had inherited an expanded education system with a rising population, but with a financial model that no longer worked and an economic context which was not favourable to the expansion of the private sector in educational provision. Whereas the predecessor military regime had been largely able to control demands from the centre, the Sarney, Collor and Franco governments were unable to follow the same approach. They faced new demands and challenges within the system, including from states, municipalities and social movements in the educational sector which had an adverse effect. Political expediency became the main form of action, the development of a sustainable and improved education system sacrificed to short term politically-inspired ends (Goldemberg, interview, 2008).

Yet it would be erroneous to assume that little was achieved educationally in Brazil during the first decade after 1985. During the first government after the generals' departure, the new freedoms presented by democracy enabled social and political pressure to be brought to bear on ending the vestiges of authoritarian rule within the educational system. This included the dismantling of the military regime's contact points within universities and the elimination of the National Civic and Moral Commission which oversaw the moral and civic education courses at all education modalities (ANDE et al 1988, vol. 2).

Arguably, the main legacy of Brazil's 'lost decade' in education was the development of the sector into an arena of political contestation, thereby weakening any possibility of policy consensus. While the political system was more democratic after 1985, it arguably suffered from a lack of legitimacy from some quarters, most notably on the radical wing of the Left including the PT. As a result, the period after the military's departure was seen as a period in which democracy was being 'democratised', with the PT seen as the main vehicle by which the democratic transition would be completed. This had implications in the educational sphere as well, since many of the interest groups, such as teachers and students, identified with this vision. The result of this separation between government and wider educational community (of the Left) would have lasting repercussions: owing to their strong identification with the Left, they were bound to come into conflict with government, which they characterised as dominated by the Right. This extended to

the opposition sustained by the teachers' union against the Collor presidency: although Collor was broadly neo-liberal in his approach, this approach was relatively absent in his educational policy, according to Goldemberg (interview, 2008).

The political bias at the root of the government-educational community debate persisted into the period of education reform under Cardoso after 1995: despite the teachers' union demand for greater educational funding by the centre, it remained neutral on FUNDEF while the PT voiced its opposition towards the fund (Souza 2005). Similarly, the PT-teacher-student alliance was evident in the various strikes and protests carried out during the Cardoso presidency (Poerner 2004; Stumpf, interview, 2006; Souza 2005; interview, 2007). From a reformist perspective this would appear odd: both primary education finance and teachers' remuneration improved during the Cardoso years as did those remaining in education. Yet the political division between the two sides persisted until the end of the Cardoso presidency. Since 2003 and the entry of the PT into government there has been a marked shift in the parameters of the educational debate: no longer is education an arena where heated political opposition occurs. Indeed, the PT government has largely maintained the model bequeathed it and limited itself to changes within the existing framework. These have included: the expansion of FUNDEF to FUNDEB, ensuring a constitutionally guaranteed fund that will include both pre-school and secondary as well as primary education; the introduction of Pro-Uni, a subsidy for poorer students in the private university system; an expansion of public universities; and the development of a new education plan, including new evaluative and accountability mechanisms. What has been notable regarding these policies is the relative absence of prominent opposition on the part of the wider educational community as occurred in the previous period, between 1985-94 and then under Cardoso. This could well suggest the achievement of political consensus within Brazil's educational sphere and the replacement of competing political visions with one primarily concerned with providing technical solutions to educational problems.

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