A study of obstacles and opportunities for students’ educational careers in Brazil

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Abstract

The purpose this descriptive study was examining teachers’ perceptions and students’ experienced problems and opportunities of educational career in Brazil. The study is focused on finding the characteristics of educational system and the contextual factors influencing possibilities of individual educational progress. The conceptual tools of the theory of equal opportunity constitute a theoretical base for this study. The theoretical concepts such as objectives, circumstances, policy and effort were the most important. The results show that ethnicity and contextual factors such as economical conditions, culture, traditions, and organisational framework have large impact on educational opportunities. The conclusion is that national educational initiatives create possibilities for individualisation, social and economic inclusion of the students who were previously deprived opportunities do pursue educational career over primary level. However, there is also a lack of resources (economic and human) to create equal and fair education for rich and poor, black and whites, for students from big cities and remote areas.

Key words: Brazilian education, educational opportunities, individualisation, social inclusion

Sammanfattning


Nyckelord: individualisering, utbildning i Brasilien, utbildningsmöjligheter, underprivilegierade elever
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Introduction

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

John Dewey, School and Society

This study was done within the frame of the teachers’ and students’ exchange project between Umeå university (Sweden) and Federal University fo Bahia (Brazil) supported by Linnaeus-Palme program. The study was conducted during the spring term 2008.

Relevance of the study

Educational systems can change very rapidly following general political development in the society. This could be seen in the case of transition from Soviet to new Russian educational system. In this process, access to good quality of education and possibilities of doing educational careers for children from different social classes had changed dramatically in the former Soviet Union republics. The children of rich get access to high quality of education while children from poor families get more and more problems with their educational carrier, in particular getting into higher education institutions. This was a result of dramatic social change in the society.

Brazil has not experienced dramatic social changes in the resent years, but rather Lula’s government tried systematically to reduce poverty in the country and introduced new measures to improve access to education of underprivileged groups of population. Curriculum innovations and a new plan for development of education were recently introduced (2008). Currently, Sweden has plans for curriculum changes in compulsory, high school and teacher education. These coming changes lead to active discussions among educationalists in Sweden. In the light of educational transformations occurring in different parts of the world, it was interesting for us to look at how Brazilian education is organised, reformed and how it is understood by different educational stakeholders. What can we learn from Brazilian experience and what can be relevant for our understandings of current transformations in educational systems in Sweden and a rest of the world?

When results of the study are presented below, we do not intend to make comparative analysis between countries. However, choice of the data was implicitly influenced by features of Brazilian education which in some way were contrasting to Swedish. Thus Swedish educational system provided, in a way, the system of reference for our thinking in the study.

Background

First, we present some information about Brazil and its educational system in order to provide a general context for the study.
General information about Brazil

Brazil was Portuguese colony during about 300 years and gained independence in 1822. It is the largest country in Latin America and it has borders with almost all South American countries (10 of 12) (Levine, 1999).

Brazil has almost the same area as USA (8512000 sq km) and a population of 190 million people. So, it is the fifth largest country in the world (CIA, 2008).

Life expectancy at birth is 68.3 years for men and 76.4 years for women. The majority of the Brazilian population – more than 80% - is concentrated in urban areas. The most populous cities are São Paulo (10 million inhabitants), followed by Rio de Janeiro (5.6 million) and Salvador (2.2 million) (CIA, 2008).

The country is divided into 26 States and one Federal District constituted by the capital city Brasília. They are presented in Figure 1 which identifies the various regions on a map of Brazil (CIA, 2008).

Figure 1 - Map of Brazil showing the regions

The Federal Republic of Brazil has a democratic Presidential system. In 2002, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the leader of the Worker’s Party (PT) was elected President and re-elected in 2006. His political program is oriented to improve the quality of life for the poor.
Brazilian socio-economic structure

The main industries in Brazil are agriculture (coffee, sugar cane, cattle, beans, soy), mining (iron, steel, gold) and manufacturing of different products including variety of automobiles. Agriculture constitutes 5% of GDP, industry 31% and services 64% (CIA, 2008). In 2004 Brazil was the world’s largest exporter of beef, chicken, soybean, sugar, orange juice and coffee (World Bank, 2004). This is visible in any supermarket. Most of the products have local origin, not only agricultural products but industrial goods as well.

The country has great natural resources. GDP grows at about 5% per year but unemployment is about 10%. GPD per capita is 9700 USD that is relatively high. However, there is highly unequal income distribution. Almost one third of population (31%) lives below poverty line (World Bank, 2004). The minimum wage in Brazil, since March 2008, is R$412 per month (about 1500 SEK). One third of the population earns a wage between the minimum and twice that amount; while about one percent of the population has an income equivalent to 20 times the minimum wage or higher. (CIA, 2008)

Inequalities in Brazilian society

Brazil has extremely unequal society. Inequalities are related to class, race, geographical location within the country, and a particular location within the cities. Northeast of Brazil where Salvador is located (the city where we were staying in Brazil) belongs to a poor part of the country. Here, a number of people living below poverty line five times more than in the Southeast where such cities as Rio de Janeiro and San Paulo are located.

In order to understand scale of economic inequalities is possible to give an example presented on educational program “Aprovado” (22/02/08), only 5% of income of 20 richest families in Brazil is enough to bring 20 millions of poor people in the country over poverty line. Socio-economic inequalities are clearly visible within the Salvador city. Different districts have very distinct boundaries, and home addresses clearly present to what socio-economic group people belong. Travelling by car in Salvador, it is possible to get through luxury districts as well as extremely poor and all spectra in between in a half an hour.

Brazil has white, black, mixed and Indian population. At least half of the countries population has some “blood mixture”. White descendents of the Portuguese aristocracy constitute most affluent part of the society (Levine, 1999). The number of Indians still in tribal life or closely associated with their original nations has been estimated in Brazil at 200 to 400 thousand. Compared with total population of 180 million, they correspond to a very small proportion (about 0,2%) of Brazilian population. In Chile, for example, almost ten per cent of the population is Indian (World Bank, 2004). Racial inequalities in the society are reflected in education. White people have better access to educational career.

Violence in the society

High social stratification leads to many social problems, among others, criminality. Criminality is a great problem for the country. Problems of violence are visible everywhere in Brazil. TV presents flow of criminal events in every local and national news sending. Everyday there is information about robberies and assaults around the city. Students and neighbours told the stories of recent assaults that happened to them and their family members.
There are zones and places located nearby but that have very different reputation in the sense of security. This is true for parks, streets, banks and busses. Local knowledge is needed to avoid un-safe places.

**Brazil's Education System**

Educational structure is comprised by the following levels: *Pré-escola* (pre-school), *Ensino Fundamental* (Elementary School), *Ensino Médio* (Secondary School), *Educação Profissional e Tecnológica* (Vocational and Technological Education) and *Ensino Superior* (Higher Education). The language of instruction is Portuguese.

Until recently, the Brazilian school system was structured in the following manner: eight years of primary education (*Ensino Fundamental*) from the age of seven, followed by three years of secondary education (*Ensino Médio*) from the age of 15. This year curriculum innovations introduced a nine-year primary education system, including pre-school year (when children are 6 years old) as a part of compulsory education.

All 27 Brazilian states and around 5500 municipalities have responsibility for provision of education.

Table 1 below presents the Brazilian education system and the general characteristics of the system (adopted from Commonwealth of Australia, 2005 and complemented with additional data).
Table 1 – Structure of the Brazilian Education System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Title</th>
<th>Nomenclature/International Education Classification</th>
<th>Duration/Grades</th>
<th>Cohort/Ideal Age</th>
<th>Authority (and number of students)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pré-escola</strong></td>
<td>Nursery Education</td>
<td>4 years 0–3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>3 years 4–6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ensino Fundamental (compulsory)</strong></td>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td><strong>1st grade</strong> 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Municipalities (18,000,000) States (12,000,000) and Federal (25000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Secondary Education</td>
<td><strong>2nd grade</strong> 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>Private (3,500,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3rd grade</strong> 9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4th grade</strong> 10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>5th grade</strong> 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>6th grade</strong> 12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>7th grade</strong> 13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>8th grade</strong> 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ensino Médio</strong></td>
<td>Upper Secondary Education</td>
<td><strong>1st grade (or 9th grade)</strong> 15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Municipalities (186,000) States (7,584,000) and Federal (68000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2nd grade (or 10th grade)</strong> 16</td>
<td></td>
<td>Private (1,100,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3rd grade (or 11th grade)</strong> 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ensino Superior</strong></td>
<td>Undergraduate Higher Education</td>
<td>Variable 18–24</td>
<td></td>
<td>Federal Government (1,192,000) Private (3,261,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st and 2nd cycles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Ideal age” means that, in reality, many students in the corresponding grades are not belonging to the intended age cohort as there are many grade repetitions.

Brazil has the national curriculum. The rules on number of hours of class per year and related legislation are centrally defined. But the implementation of curriculum is local, as well as setting salaries and careers for teachers.
Early child schooling (for age 2-6 years old) is not compulsory, but many parents want to enrol their children to “small schools” as it gives them also more chance for future success in education. Basic compulsory education is of 9 years (séries), for all children from 6 years old till 15 years old. Schools have compulsory subjects (core curriculum) and have possibilities to use part of the school time for optional subjects.

Admission to higher education in Brazil is realised through an entrance exam (vestibular). Each university has very demanding entrance examination that students need to sit when they apply. Vestibular is a general knowledge examination, which tests students on Mathematics, Portuguese, English, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, History, Geography, Literature, Politics and Current Affairs. Most universities also use the results from the final school examination in assessing applications for undergraduate courses. Nowadays quotas exist for public school graduates to enter university. About fifty percent of places at public universities are allocated to students graduated from public schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

Teacher qualification in public school is rather low. In total, less than 50% of teachers in basic education (including pre-schools) have higher education degree. Solving this problem is considered as a priority by the federal government. Substantial financial support is provided by the federal government in order to create possibilities for teachers to get licenciatura (higher education).

Literacy problems still exist in the society. According to advertisement presented on TV during March 2008, 15.8 million children of age corresponding ensino fundamental are not attending schools. This problem is related to drop-out and low attendance of classes in the beginning of 2008.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers’ and students’ perceptions and experiences of educational problems and opportunities in Brazil. The study has focused on finding the characteristics of educational system and the contextual factors influencing possibilities of individual educational progress.

The goal of this study was to gain some understanding how individuals can move/progress through educational system in Brazil.

The study questions were:

- What characterises educational system in Brazil in terms of providing obstacles and opportunities for the students?
- Which contextual factors (e.g. geographical, socio-economic, family background) affect students’ educational progress and in what way?

**Theoretical framework and previous research**

The concepts of the theory of equal opportunity proposed by Romer (1998, 2003) constitute a theoretical base for this study. The choice of this theoretical framework is defined by the
purpose of the research. The main concepts of the theory are presented in summarised form in the text below.

**The theory of equal opportunity**

There are five fundamental concepts in the theory of equal opportunity: objective, circumstance, type, effort, and policy (Romer, 2003). The *objective* is the kind of outcome or advantage for whose acquisition one wishes to equalize opportunities, in a given population. *Circumstances* are the set of environmental influences, beyond the individual's control, that affect his or her chances of acquiring the objective. A *type* is the group of individuals in the population with a given set of circumstances. *Effort* is autonomously chosen action - within the individual's control - which, if expended in greater amounts, will increase the degree to which the individual acquires the objective. A *policy* is a social intervention that is used to influence the degree to which individuals acquire the objective. The *equal opportunity policy* is the one from the set of feasible policies that will make it the case that the degree to which individuals acquire the objective is independent of their circumstances, and sensitive only to their effort (Romer, 2003).

As we see¹ the *objective* of educational policy in Brazil is to create equal opportunities for all young people to acquire “good quality education”. Thus, Romer suggests that all factors influencing individual (educational) attainment be sorted between a category of *effort* factors, for which individuals must be held responsible, and a category of *circumstance* factors, which are the source of variation in the outcomes (educational results).

Using an example from other field, Dias, Jones (2007) explain that in order to assess equality of opportunity in health, the researcher may define lifestyles (healthy eating, alcohol consumption, smoking and so forth) as *effort* variables and factors such as gender, ethnicity and family background as *circumstances*.

The heterogeneity in those *circumstances* that lie beyond the control of the individual can be high, and they might significantly affect the results of his/her efforts, and possibly the levels of those efforts themselves. It is likely that *circumstances*, such as parental social class, have an impact on lifestyles or educational ambitions. Roemer’s suggest sorting individuals into types according to their circumstances: within each type, differential outcome is explained solely by differential effort. Equal opportunity obtains when all those exercising the same degree of effort attain the same outcome irrespective of their types. (Dias, Jones, 2007).

Brazilian researchers Bourguignon, Ferreira, Menéndez (2003) show using Romer’s theory that inequality of opportunities associated with people’s race, region of origin, the education and the occupation of their parents (*circumstances*) influence strongly their future incomes in Brazil. They estimated the impact of opportunities (or circumstances) both directly on incomes, and indirectly on the level of efforts – such as schooling - undertaken by individuals. They found that parental education – and, to a lesser extent, occupation – do affect the length of children’s school careers. Inequality of all observed circumstances and efforts in Brazil are higher than the total inequality of outcomes observed in many countries in the world. They conclude that efforts (educational *policy*) to reduce this dependence, through conditional cash-based assistance to students and their families, or through after-school programs for students who may be falling behind, might well deserve consideration.

¹ For example, from the paper published in the journal *Scientific American* in February 2008 by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the president of Brazil, Fernando Haddad, Brazil's minister of education and Miguel A. L. Nicolelis, scientific coordinator of the Federal Institute for Education, Science and Technology.
The Romer’s theory has also relation to standard opposition between inequality and mobility (social mobility). The US is often presented as more unequal than European societies but at the same time more mobile from a generation to the next, a feature which is sometimes taken as the sign of a more equal distribution of chances or opportunities in the US (Bourguignon, Ferreira, Menéndez, 2003).

Voigt (2007) also uses a theory of equal opportunity to discuss a variety of mechanisms through which differences in background conditions (circumstances) make “non-traditional students” (from socially disadvantaged groups) less likely to apply to university and/or particular institutions. She concludes that unequal participation of non-traditional students in higher education remains a problem of social justice in many countries.

Below, we present brief overview of education development problems in Brazil.

**Educational development in Brazil**

Many current problems related to access to schooling and opportunities for student’s educational career have roots in the history of education in Brazil. Different researchers embraced and analysed the development of educational system in the country. Thus, Castro (2007) explains that Brazil inherited from Portugal a very backward system of education restricted only to the economic elite in the society. For about four and a half centuries, until middle of XXth century, Brazilian education kept in line with the overall poverty of the country. Poor country had poor education. Economic growth that took place during the XXth century also picked up educational development. However, the country remained far more backward in education than would correspond to its per capita income.

According to Castro (2007), the development of a sound education system in Brazil began only in the 1970s, when the Government started allocating funds for the improvement of education facilities and opened Federal universities in all States. Since that time, the great progress was achieved by Brazilian education.

At present, around 97% of the 7-15 year cohort is attending school, however, only about one third of the age cohort finishes the eight years of primary school. The dropouts come predominantly from poor families (Castro, 2007).

Menezes (2007) states that during the last fifteen years enrolment of student at secondary education has triplicated, but its quality is very low. At the end of this level, half of the students have problems in interpreting questions or write texts. A major concern of the Federal Government is to improve the quality of education in Brazil, and to reduce the high incidence of grade repetition in public schools.

School infrastructure in the country is still very poor. Many public schools do not have electricity, water and toilets. The situation with laboratories and equipment is even worse. This is particular true for poor regions and states, like Bahia (ISP, 2006).

Castro (2007) praises current efforts of the Federal Government to facilitate access to education for all people. In the public education system, one or two meals per day are provided to 35 million pre-school and elementary school children. The government develops programs for retention of students in schools and provides focused actions for improving
quality of teaching and learning. However, he also expresses concern that expansion of education sometimes leads to lowering quality of educational outcomes.

The Brazilian Plan for the Development of Education (PDE) announced new educational policy to empower young Brazilian people to become true participants in a global society (da Silva, Haddad, Nicolelis, 2008). The goal is to provide “systemic high-quality education, disseminated to reach the entire territory, including the most remote and impoverished communities of this vast country, so that all Brazilians can acquire the means to become creative and critical thinkers, capable of developing their own opinions and becoming true contributors to solve the challenges involved in constructing a fair and democratic society” (da Silva, Haddad, Nicolelis, 2008).

In addition to promoting actions to improve the basic training of teachers, to establish a national evaluation system, and to define the basis for a close collaboration between the federal government and the states and municipal authorities, the PDE provides, extra 19 billion reals (US$10,633,535,000) earmarked for education (da Silva, Haddad, Nicolelis, 2008). Thus, the Federal Government shows commitment to further reinforcement of Brazilian educational system.

**Availability of education**

Formally, general education is compulsory for all children between 6 and 14 years old. However, not every child has possibility to attend school. Especially, it is difficult for poor families to put child in schools. We will discuss reasons for that later on.

School buildings are used in three shifts, but there are not enough places for student (vagas) anyway. Many students get places at night shift. This also creates additional problems related to security when they returning home from schools. Therefore, drop-out from night shifts students is especially high (Pitombo, 2007). At the same time, studies at night open possibilities for people of all ages to get education that they often missed because of different reasons earlier. So, in the classroom can sit 15 years old side-by-side with 65 years old students.

Secondary education is not compulsory but it opens more possibilities on the labour market and thus is attractive. However 2005, only 45% of young people of corresponding age attended the secondary schools (Pitombo, 2007). There are many different reasons why less than half of the children attend this school level, but availability of places in nearby secondary schools and poor economic conditions of families are the main ones. Pitombo (2007) also refers till statistical data that in secondary education 34% of student do not continue after finishing first year, 25% do not go further after second year, and 18% after third year. This figures show that there are many week points in functioning of secondary education in the country.
Methods of study

This is a descriptive qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews and observations complemented with analysis of educational documents and our own ethnographic experiences in the country, including reading educational magazines and periodicals, watching TV programs, being with local people in different circumstances and environments.

Semi-structured interviews mean that the interviewer sets up a general structure by deciding in advance what ground is to be covered and what main questions are to be asked. This leaves the detailed structure to be worked out during the interview (Drever, 1995).

Drever (1995) explains that semi-structured interviews allow to:

- Gather actual information about people’s circumstances
- Collect statements of their preferences and opinions
- Explore in some depth their experiences, motivation and reasoning

Sample

Two undergraduate students and one graduate student from the faculty of education of Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and two school administrators/teachers (from public and private schools) were interviewed.

The experience of the teachers in the profession was over ten years. The students were on different levels in their education (one third year, another second year and a PhD student). The teacher sample consisted of two women, while of the students were a man and two women.

Additional informal interviews and discussions were also made with people outside this group to get a broader view on the subject. These were a student studying psychology at a Private University in the same city, and a student who studied computers. All the additional interviewees were women.

The selection of the interviewees were made through convenience sampling (Berg, 2004). The interviewees were chosen to get information regarding their educational experience.

Data Collection

All data was gathered during the spring term of 2008. To get a deeper insight into educational context, information was also gathered through media and at two schools where observations and teacher interviews were done.

Observations were conducted in a private and a public school during the morning shifts. The public school was more open for us. We could visit the classrooms and see how lessons were conducted. We could take pictures of different activities taking place during that morning.
During the visit, we were accompanied by the school rector. In the private school, there were more restrictions for our activities. It was not possible to visit lessons and we were advised not to take pictures of children. However, we were welcomed to see all facilities where students were not engaged in activities at the moment or observe activities from a distance in order to not disturb teaching-learning process. The number of observation hours in each school was about five in each school. Our observations were documented in the form of diary notes and photos.

Semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995) were the main form of data collection. Some themes were used as a foundation for the interviews (see appendixes 1 and 2). The questions were sometimes reformulated and other questions were added to deepen the answers from the interviewee. First, broad questions were asked and then focus was made on the aspects that the interviewees choose to address. It made the interviews differ in how they were made, which is considered as a strength rather than a weakness in ethnographical studies (Kullberg, 1996) since the purpose was not to compare the interviewees but to gather as broad material as possible.

The interviews were made in rather closed environments as offices or empty classrooms. Some were also made in informal settings, as private homes. The time spent on each interview was about one hour. The interviewees’ main ideas were documented through written notes that were transformed into text directly after the interview. The data was structured around a number of central themes. This was made to make the analysis of the material easier.

**Method of Analysis**

The transcripts of the interviews and the notes from the school observations were analysed to find essential constructs that characterised the interviewees’ experiences. As the first means of analysis, fundamental concepts of the theory of equal opportunity were used to give a picture of the character of the educational problems. After that additional constructs were created to reflect the richness of the data collected.

To make sure that data was correctly understood, factors concerning the context interpreted correctly, and to avoid too wide generalisations, the results were discussed with interviewees and a teacher at the faculty of education (UFBA).

**Ethical Considerations**

The questions posed in the study concern areas where certain information could be sensitive for the interviewees; therefore, all identities are kept confidential including name of peoples and the name of the schools in Brazil.
Results

In this chapter, the results from personal experiences in Brazil, the interviews, school visits and classroom observations are presented. They are organised under a number of paragraphs that summarise the most interesting data collected during our field work in Brazil.

Prestige of education

From the interviews became clear that education has high prestige in Brazilian society. It is considered as an opportunity to assure good quality of life in the future. Parents are willing to make great economic sacrifices in order to help children to get necessary preparation for university studies. It is clear for many parents and students that only higher levels of education can assure wellbeing. University diploma can guaranty reasonably good salary. Statistics shows that in Brazil people with higher education degree gain about five times more than those who work just with diploma of secondary education (Ioschpe, 2008). Secondary education (ensino médio) can open possibility for different less prestigious jobs, but is also nowadays a necessary pre-condition for employment.

Primary education is no longer enough to get even simple jobs. An example was given by one interviewee, that to be employed by municipality as a garbage collector you have to have ensino médio. Otherwise it is difficult to get this or any other public employment.

Secondary education is demanded by modern economy. Even in relatively poor regions of the country, like Bahia, industry is quickly developed through the foreign investments and placement of the foreign assembling factories there. This contextual factor demands higher levels of education from individuals. The families realise this situation and stimulate the children to get at least secondary education.

Families have big expenses for education of their children. An interviewee mentioned (with referents to estimation made in magazine Veja) that the total cost for bringing up a child up till 23 years (end of university) is about 1.6 millions real (about 6 millions SEK). Significant part of this sum is the costs directly related to education.

So, high prestige of education in Brazil appears to be a strong contextual factor encouraging students and their families to aspire for as long educational careers as possible. This was also a reason to look deeper on issue of obstacles and opportunities for acquiring education.

Family-school relationships

Pedagogical coordinator of a private school, as well as other informants, underlined problems related to family-school relationships. Nowadays, family becomes less engaged in students schooling. She attributed this problem to different factors. For example, individualism that dominates modern society makes that parents are more engaged in their own life success, their well-being, and their own interests than in children’s schooling. Both parents often work during the day but study during the nights and holidays. This is important for their professional development.
Families are also less stable now. There could be 2-3 marriages for both parents, so children live in different homes during the school study periods - in father’s, mother’s and grandparents’ places.

The parents become more self-excluded from education of children, leaving this task to the school. “I have paid for my child schooling, so now I have done mine.” This what some parents think according the school leaders. However, our interviewed students had positive experience of parents’ encouragement in their studies. The parents provided good examples of how education pays off.

**Low quality of education**

From the interviews became clear that possibilities for progressing in education depend very much on what school a student attends. Quality of education varies very much from school to school, but for the majority of children in the country it is rather low.

The quality of education can be measured by different indexes. We will use just some to show why quality of education presents a great concern in the society. We will exemplify it with data from Bahia. In 2004 repetition and drop-out rate in Bahia were 19% and 17% in basic education and respectively 10% and 21% in secondary education. This means that each fifth child repeats the grade in primary school and the same proportion drops-out at secondary school grades (ISP, 2006)

National tests also reveal serious problems with quality of learning. Table 2 below shows results of the national evaluation conducted in Bahia in year 2003 in grades 4 and 8 of primary education (PE) and the last (third) year of secondary education (SE) (ISP, 2006).

**Table 2. Results of the national evaluation in Portuguese and Mathematics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>4th grade PE</th>
<th>8th grade PE</th>
<th>3th year SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>28,85%</td>
<td>71,8%</td>
<td>48,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>31,8%</td>
<td>36,2%</td>
<td>23,3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, most of the students have problems in both subjects in primary and secondary schools. The results mirror situation in most of the public schools in the country.

The situation with low quality of learning outcomes is of great public concern. This issue is often discussed on TV and popular journals. The common explanations of this problem are low teachers’ professional qualifications and engagement in their work as well as poor physical facilities in schools. These issues will be discussed below.

**Teachers’ pedagogical competence and work load**
Our interviewees affirmed that many teachers in Brazil are under-qualified and have low didactical competence. As an example, they stated that there is almost no training in use of practical exercises during the teacher education. Laboratory skills are not part of the course examination. So, teachers do not have the skills of laboratory work and students do not gain such competence either. In practice, for successful educational career students in schools do not need to have skills of using laboratory equipment. This is true for all subjects including Sciences.

Teacher’s work load is officially 20 h per week, this gives about double minimum wage for the country, approximately 800 real. Additional payments for qualification and other professional benefits can give in total up till 1000 real per month. As Brazilian economists evaluate, for minimum decent standard of living a family of four has to have income of about 2000 real per month. So, teachers have to teach 40 and 60 hours per week in order to double their salary in public school.

This affects, logically, the quality of teaching and possibilities for teachers’ full engagement in their work. Working 60 hours per week leaves little time for teachers for lessons preparation and for assuring quality of student’s assessment. As one of the informants (school administrator) pointed out teacher is a survivor in Brazil. His or her main preoccupation is to provide minimum living conditions for the family, and not assure high pedagogical outcomes.

According to interview data, economical situation of teachers in school under control of the state government is worse than in municipal and federal government’s schools. Last year local government schools in Bahia had strike for more than 45 days. Low salaries and poor working conditions cause the strike. During this “war” between the teachers and the state government the children were the main offers or hostages of the situation. We were told that when school’s meals were not available, many children from the poor families were hungry during all the days. Teachers in Bahia have compensated absence of lessons during the strike period by extra study time in the beginning of the next term. But, in general, strikes are common in Brazil and teachers strike quite often and for the long time. This influences quality of educational outcome.

With expansion of educational system, teachers face new challenges. They need to learn to adopt their teaching style to new (socially disadvantaged) groups of students that were previously excluded from the educational system. These children do not have education and literacy traditions in their homes. However, teachers are not trained to meet this new school population and many of them do not have much energy and interest to develop appropriate pedagogical measures to assure that these students will succeed in school.

According to the interviewed school administrators, similar situation happens when the teachers work with the students during the night shifts. Facing more socially mature students, the teachers do not change their way of teaching that they have used during the day’s classes. They provide infantilised forms of work that are inappropriate for students who study at night. Teachers do not take into account social and work experience of their students. This situation is also described in the paper of Marques (2007).

**Schools’ physical facilities**

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2 Data from tv program *Economia* on 29/2 2008.
The informants stated that most of the primary and even secondary schools in Brazil do not have laboratories. During our school visits we tried to see what kind of laboratory equipment is available. No visited schools had science or language laboratories. Meanwhile, video equipment and video-libraries were available. Teachers used to use them in different forms and schools’ representatives were proud to show them to us.

In general, there is a great difference in physical facilities between public and private schools. This issue is discussed more broadly below. However, here we will just give an example of observed difference in sport facilities between visited public and private schools. In the private school, Olympic size swimming pool, football grounds and sport halls were available. In the public school, sport lessons were conducted in a small yard between kitchen and a concrete wall.

**Private schools**

From our interviews became clear that in Brazil, in order to succeed in life, you have to go to private school. Such schools give much better chances for entering to tertiary education and also create good social contacts for life.

Private schools constitute very important part of Brazilian education. During the school visits, we learned that about 15% of children go to private schools. Cost of keeping child in a private school is about 600-1000 real (2000-4000 SEK) per months depending on school and grade. Normally, lower grades have lower payment and highest month’s fee is in the last year of secondary education. School materials, transport and extra-curricular activities (dance, sport, arts, etc) are also paid by parents. In public schools all this is free for children.

Public and private schools should follow the same national curriculum, but in reality implemented curriculum is quite different. During the school visits, we could see that conditions of work and study are much better in private schools. The issue is not about number of children per class. In private schools, number of pupils in a classroom (lecturer hall) can be more than 50. While, normally in public schools there is not more than 45 children in a class. Teachers’ in private schools use microphones, so their voice is heard not only in the classrooms but also in outdoors.

Learning environment is more positive in private schools. Children are more engaged in learning, performance and school life. In general, there are no discipline and work moral problems. Teachers earn about two times more in private schools than in public, but it varies from school and grade of teaching. For example, the teacher who works in last year of secondary education (and bares main responsibility for preparing students to vestibular, entrance exam to university) has at least double salary in comparisons with colleagues in the same school working in other grades. This is considered as unjust practice by many teachers and administrators. However, it is a strong tradition and as one administrator commented it is impossible to change the situation. Private school teachers’ trade union works to maintain this situation, and this trade union is very strong.

Studies in private schools are very attractive for people, but the costs are very high too. So, many middle class families do not have possibility to send their children to such schools, nowadays. They choose public schools of good quality. This practice becomes even more popular in the last years when quotas were introduced for public universities. Thus, attending
a good public school gives much higher chance to enter to prestigious faculties, like law or medicine. But it is very difficult to get a place in good public school. There are entrance exams and other factors that play role in the selection of the candidates.

Here, we would also like to make a note, that not all private schools have high standards of facilities and teaching. Being on the free educational market, brand of private schools is attractive for parents. But different providers sell different quality of education. And not all private schools are as good as they promise to be. This commented several people with whom we discussed the issue of private schools in Brazil.

**Gender issues in education**

According to the informants, gender issues are not considered as of high priority in the society. Social and economic stratification (class issues), racial issues and religious issues are considered of much importance. For example, administrators paid our attention to presence in the school of children from different economic groups and religions, but never articulated spontaneously gender, if not were asked purposefully. But even in that case they just did not see many problems to discuss in this concern.

However, we could notice in our interviews and observations that gender plays very important role in choosing educational passes and professional careers. Boys change more often schools and universities than girls do. As one male informant stated, you should get chance to see what really interests you. So, it is good to have liberty to try and choose what you really want to do in your life. At the same time, a female informant talked about importance to get quickly as possible good education in order to be able to have independent economic life. These informants also pointed out general trend of female students to keep on the track and do not change as often as men their places of life and study.

In Brazil, women now have more schooling than men, at all levels, except doctorate. The difference in graduation from the secondary education is ten percent in favour of female students. Female students show also better performance in different exams (Castro, 2007). Nowadays, it is possible to say that women outperform men in education in Brazil. Castro (ibid) talks about “feminisation of education in Brazil”. During the school visits, we could also observe that majority of teachers and school administrators are women. This seems to be valid for private as well as public schools.

Our informants underlined a new trend in Brazil that young women do not want to be dependent on men. They want to have their own income and houses. This is true even for women from historically disadvantaged groups of the society. The issue of disadvantaged groups of the society is presented in more details in the following paragraphs.

**Some aspects of inclusive education**

Based on our Swedish experience we were particular interested to look at the issue of educational opportunities for physically and mentally handicapped children.

According to the interviewed school administrator from public school, nowadays, students with physical and light mental impairments are encouraged to attend ordinary public schools in Brazil. Normally, director can not reject a student on a wheelchair or even with hearing
impairments. But in reality, some schools can just state that they can not manage such students or that they have already too many “problem/difficult students” registered in the school.

The public school that we visited has policy of taking all categories of children from wheelchair bound to deaf, with only exception of blind. The school has reputation of strong inclusive education.

Class and race issues in education

Different information sources reveal that Brazil never had laws that discriminated against blacks. Historically, the official ideology was one of integration and several laws made discrimination a serious offence (Levine, 1999). However, since the blacks started very poor, they had little access to education. The lack of schools and especially good schools made the chances of school success for a poor blacks very limited.

The effects of low parents’ education, poor economic conditions in the community and geographical factors (most of the black people come from rural remote areas) make, traditionally, educational results of black people rather low. However, in the education research community in Brazil (Castro, 2007) exists an agreement that today being poor is much more harmful than being black in terms of educational success. In other words, the children of poor whites are as bad off as the children of poor blacks.

During the visit to a public school, the director told us that parents’ illiteracy is a serious obstacle in giving children skills of reading. As majority of the poor families never use to read child-books to their children and do not have magazines, newspapers and other literature at home, their children do not see value and pleasure of reading at home.

In order to partly overcome this problem, the school organises evening adult literacy courses, where parents are invited to participate in first hand. According to the director, as a result of this literacy action, the teachers could see more interest from the children to borrow books from the school library home during the last two years.

Quota programs at the threshold of higher education

One of the first things that we learned from the interviews was peoples concern about “quota system”. This system was experimentally introduced about ten years ago and intend to increase chances of the poor students (from public schools) to go to higher education. Currently, public universities reserve about 50% of places for students from public schools.

Along with the quotas for public education students, the Ministry of Education also proposed quotas for the blacks and the Indians. But it is not clear how to determine who is black or Indian? One way is to consider visual aspects or ancestry. Discussed official policy is to accept self-identification. Whoever classifies him or herself as black is black. But initial implementation of this policy has shown some abuse. Discussing the issue of who is of what colour at the entrance to higher education seems to create negative impact on race relations in the society. So, race quotas are still in the phase of experimentation in Brazil.
However, the issue of quota is very complex and do not lead automatically to equity improvements. As in any society, more wealthy and educated families try to find advantages of using administrative instruments, in that case quotas. An example that came up during the interviews was a use of good public schools to overcome quota problem. In Salvador, for example, military college is a public school that has better reputation than many private schools. So, we learned that parents try to put their children in this college at least for the last year. Thus, they have almost guaranty that the child will be admitted to the most prestigious faculties after graduation from this school. In that case, quotas play also a role of increasing chances of good educational career for middle class children rather than for children from the poor families.

As we can see, new administrative measures in Brazilian education system are oriented towards broadening opportunities for different categories of the students to go to higher education, but in reality the poor groups still remain in disadvantaged position.

**Violence in schools**

Problems of discipline in schools are broadly discussed in the society (Marques, 2007). We found that many public schools in the country experience problems of violence that has many dimensions. Bulling and destruction of school physical facilities can be classified as less serious examples of violence. We heard stories how teachers were threatened to be beaten to death by the students (or the students’ out-of-school friends or relatives) if they do not put good mark on the tests.

When a student passes a test this can mean some economic benefits for the family. Brazil has programs called Family Scholarships (*bolsa-escola*). These programs provide cash allowances for poor families, as long as they keep their children in schools, with regular attendance and if the students obtaining acceptable grades. In some cases, programs include the creation of a savings account for the family that only becomes available if the child completes the corresponding educational cycle.

Therefore, failing in school tests can bring additional economic problems for the poor families. This is one of the reasons that can explain that incidents happen against teachers and their family members. However, there are many narratives about unmotivated violence in schools and around school buildings.

**Competitive and selective nature of Brazilian education**

In discussion with our informants about education in Brazil, the most sensitive issue was passing different forms of exams. Many students feel stressed and exhausted by different form of testing. In general, Brazilian system is very competitive and has many different forms of exams. Grading is on scale of 10, over 5 or 7 (depending on school) is considered a positive result. Assessment starts from grade 1 and has many different forms and providers. Pre-school education is evaluated in qualitative terms and evaluation forms depend on the school.

Selective role of evaluation is very strong in Brazil. So, parents can (and often forced by the system) pay for extra training of their children to pass exams and tests, especially entrance
exam to higher education. Attending private lessons is a way that students (or better to say their parents) use to prepare for different selective exams or tests.

The federal government also makes different initiatives to find and stimulate development of talented student in educational system. Students can gain scholarships through different forms of competitions. For example, National Brazilian Mathematics Olympiad (www.obmep.org.br) for public school students started in 2005. In the past three years, it gained huge popularity. During the last year competition, number of participants mounted to 17.000.000 students from grade 6 and upwards. 98% of all municipalities of the country took part in this event (Polato, 2008). For the year 2008 there are already more than 18 millions registered participants. Throughout the country the nodes of science and mathematics studies are organised. These give interested students assistance in advanced studies in the area of science and mathematics. Those who gained premiums on maths Olympics got scholarships to facilitate their further studies.

The similar situation is with Brazilian Physics Olympiad. In 2007 number of participants doubled from previous year and reached 129 268 students from all states of the country (Jornal da Ciência, 2008). The best students get premiums and scholarships. Thus, academic competitions create new opportunities for talented children.

However, we could see that competitive characteristic of Brazilian education (with a lot of tests and exams) is perceived by many students as grate obstacle for progressing through educational system. Passing exam becomes a form of “expertise”. Here all means considered to be good enough for achieving the desired result. Private tutoring, learning/drilling just for exam, or cheating all is socially accepted if it allows passing the exam. According to our informants, parents also often concern more about the good note on the exam than the way how it was achieved. “Being an expert” in tests passing gives high social status among friends. Reasonable degree of students’ cheating seems to be also considered as acceptable practice by educational institutions.
Discussion

This chapter begins with a summarising analysis of the results with focus on the research questions asked in this thesis, followed by implications of the results. After that, the method is discussed.

Analysis of the results

Based on the results of the study we have been able to extract some general characteristics of Brazilian education system and contextual factors that influence students’ educational careers. In the light of the theory of equal opportunity, characteristics of Brazilian education system and contextual factors are the circumstances that are beyond of the students’ control. These circumstances can hinder or support students’ opportunities for achieving success in education.

One of the important pre-conditions for individual educational carrier is access to schooling. It appears that only in the last three decades Brazil has achieved a major expansion in its education system. Access to basic education is nearly universal and secondary education has been expanding very rapidly. This situation opened many new opportunities for children from disadvantaged groups of the society to attend schools.

Apparently Lula’s government attempts to develop educational policy to equalise educational opportunities in Brazil. The country carried on programs to provide low-income families a small monthly stipend, usually called “Bolsa Escola”, which requires in turn that the family puts and keeps the children in school. This gave positive outcomes – more equal school enrolment.

Literacy programs for adult population conducted by many actors (mainly NGOs) is important feature of Brazilian educational system. These programs lead to raising the educational level of poor parents who can in turn stimulate their children for better studies in schools and encourage them to aspire for higher levels of education. Here is also possible to mention the quota programs for entrance to public universities. These programs aim to increase opportunities for students graduated from public schools (where study most of disadvantaged students) to go to higher education.

Rather prestigious secondary education is hard to achieve. It seems to be the most problematic area and the weakest ring in the educational chain. In many public schools, it is taught by under-prepared and unmotivated teachers. These teachers often have problems and not trained to deal with children coming from deprived families who nowadays gain more access to this level of education. Apart from low professional competence of teachers, there are many other obstacles build in into the educational system as availability of resources in schools, discipline in the classroom, etc. These problems are also providing negative circumstances (in Romer’s terms) for child educational progress.

Statistics shows (Ioschpe, 2008) that almost half of the students in secondary education attend evening classes; many of them work and many of those who attend day-classes are older than they should be. These factors contribute to high drop-out and repetition rates at this level of
education, as our data and results presented by other researchers (Pitombo, 2007) show. This makes the situation with choice of individual career in the educational system very complex.

Poor physical facilities in schools also create serious obstacles for success in many educational areas. Absence of laboratory equipment and practical activities in natural sciences make most of the students handicapped when it concerns entrance to the faculties of science, engineering and medicine. This problem affects particularly hard the graduates of public schools.

All our interviewees agreed upon that education has high prestige in Brazil. However, the country does not have economic and educational resources to accommodate needs of all students aspiring to climb the educational pyramid. Therefore, Brazilian educational system became very selective and competitive.

Inequalities are still very strong in Brazilian education. These are mainly conditioned by contextual factors. Depending on where child is born, in what family (economical wealth, ethnic group, socio-cultural capital), in what region (centre or periphery, city or countryside, North-South), his or her educational success is often predefined. For example, good family economy allows sending children to private schools and thus significantly increasing their chances to succeed in life.

It is difficult to move over regional and class borders even if Lula’s government tries to provide different incentives for poor families to facilitate their children’s schooling. In terms of the theory of equal opportunity (Romer, 1998, 2003), it is possible to state that environmental influences (or circumstances) strongly affect child’s chances of acquiring the good education and moving through educational and social hierarchy.

Circumstances related to family engagement in child studies have also strong influence on students’ educational career. Child needs stable family environment, good example from parents of loving books, feeling that parents are interested in his/her studies. Those children who do not have this positive literacy environment at home have to make an extra effort to achieve good results in school.

According to our informants, there was no special effort to equalize gender enrolment or any other clear official policy in this area. Educational success of women happened naturally when general conditions were created for broad enrolment in education. Nowadays, girls over perform boys in all educational levels. This reflects the effort that female student invested in their educational success. This corresponds to the statement of the Romer’s theory that individual efforts will define outcomes (educational success) when opportunities are equalised.

Based on the results of our study we can conclude that the official policy of the Federal Government, as it understood by most of our informants, attempts to equalise educational opportunities. This policy focuses on provision of basic education to everybody that potentially can open variety of paths and opportunities for students coming from different backgrounds and conditions. The goal of broadening educational opportunities demands, in first hand, good quality of basic education. However, even if this challenge is accepted the Government there is also a lack of resources (economic and human) to create equal and fair

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3 However, we have also met people who were sceptical about Lula’s government commitment to raising quality of education in the country.
education for rich and poor, black and whites, for students from big cities and remote areas.
So, nowadays for poor people in Brazil, it seems to be still more obstacles than opportunities to achieve higher education degree. But these people constitute the majority of the population.

Brazil can be considered as a social-cultural opposition to Sweden. In Sweden, equal opportunities for education are guaranteed by law and economic prerequisites are created to assure juridical right of the people for equal access to education. In Sweden equal opportunities for education are practically created for all students independently if they live in rural or urban areas, in the North or South of the country, what colour of skin or origin they have. Swedish students have, independently of economic status of their parents, opportunities to get higher education. The system of scholarships and opportunities for summer and extra work make students economically and socially independent already from the age of seventeen-eighteen. This is impossible to imagine in Brazil, where many adult people are force to live with their parents in order to have minimum standard of living.

Studying Brazilian educational system, we could gain new insights into positive and problematic aspects of the Swedish system. Some issues in development of the education in Sweden are reflected in the more contrasting way in Brazil. Let’s consider an issue of quotas for entrance to higher education. Sweden had cases when universities tried to introduce quota for students with foreign background underrepresented at prestigious faculties, like faculty of Law in Uppsala. So, the students with lower grades could enter the faculty because of their immigrant background, but the Swedish students with better grades were left out. This led to the court hearings and certain “political tensions” in the university system. This case was broadly discussed in Swedish media. Even in Brazil, the issue of quotas reveals complexity of the situation with equal access to education related to racial and class problems. In our opinion, should be seen as temporary solutions. It is more important to give all students equal opportunities to get good education in schools and the best ones should come to university, rather than to try artificially regulate recruitment process, which can eventually lead to lowering standards and quality in higher education.

Currently, Sweden broadens privatisation of the schools. Variety of new actors and education providers come to the scene. However, Brazilian experience shows that free educational market can lead to variation in quality of schools and schooling. At the same time, new Swedish policy aiming for increasing role of examination and assessment in education which together with possibilities for free choice of schools for the students lead to the situation that competitiveness gets “new entrance” to Swedish school system. So, many curricular features of Swedish education become more similar to Brazilian but still articulated in less expressed form here than there. We see the value to learn more about other educational systems in order to understand better your own.

**Discussion of Method**

The aim of the study was not to look at individuals’ educational careers per se but rather the students’ and teachers’ perceptions of opportunities for educational progress.

The use of variety of research methods in this study gives a broad picture of Brazilian education, and its sociocultural context. This study focused on how people perceived opportunities in educational system, but their perceptions were tied to surrounding culture.
The observations were an important source of data since they allowed us to discover additional aspects that we would not have found through interviews. The observations and interviews were used as triangulation in the study. They were mutually confirmatory and complementary; things we observed were confirmed and found their explanations in the interviews and vice versa. This gives the results rather high validity.
References


**Websites and electronic resources used for the study:**

Appendix 1. Interview guide for the school administrators

1. Please tell us about your school.
2. What is your experience of new federal educational policy?
3. Are there new educational opportunities created for students’ access to education?
4. What are the main problems that students experience in progressing through their education?
5. What problems the school and the teachers experience in their work?
6. What do you consider as the main problems in Brazilian education?
Appendix 2. Interview guide for the students

1. Please tell us about what do you study and how do you see your future professional activity.

2. What do you know about recent curriculum innovations that the Lula’s government is undertaking?

3. What problems you or your friends/relatives have experienced in progressing through different educational levels?

4. Can you think about some missing opportunities for your studies / educational career?

5. Who (or what) has influenced most your educational choices?

6. What do you consider as the main problems in Brazilian education?