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## EDUCATION FOR ALL IN THE 9 MOST POPULOUS COUNTRIES

# BRAZIL : THE RENAISSANCE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

by ROSA-MARÍA TORRES \*

New and exciting developments are definitely occurring in Brazil's educational arena. I was able to confirm it during the two missions that took me to Brazil in 1994, where I had an opportunity to visit different states, schools and UNICEF-supported projects, and talk with a wide range of people — government officials, university and research center professionals, teachers and principals, parents and community leaders, private enterprise and NGO officials, and, of course, UNICEF personnel.

In no region of the world is income distribution more inequitable than in Latin America, where the poorest 20 percent of the population receives only 4 percent of the national income. And no country in the region is more extreme than Brazil, where the latter percentage is further reduced to 2 percent. Brazil's educational situation cannot but reflect these extreme economic and social contradictions: with amongst the world's greatest wealth and potential, the country has also some of the region's — and even the world's — poorest quantitative and qualitative educational indicators. A comparatively high adult illiteracy rate (officially estimated in 19 percent for 1990, high within a regional context) reflects an inefficient school system that provides access to 88 percent of the school-age population (nearly 3.5 million children aged 7 to 14 years remain out of school), but where only 22 children, out of every 100 that enroll, complete the primary school cycle.

Brazilians are the first to acknowledge and decry their country's educational problems. The difference now is the transition from criticism to action, from negativism to commitment. One perceives, in particular, an overall renaissance of the public school system, efforts to renew it and build credibility around it.

Brazil has always been a laboratory for educational experimentation and innovation, and a source of inspiration for the progressive education movement in Latin America. Brazil is well known for Paulo Freire's contribution, whose ideas spread rapidly throughout the region and the rest of the world during the 60s and 70s. More recent developments, however, are largely unknown outside Brazil. The size of the country — a subcontinent within the continent — together with the language barrier (Brazil being the only Portuguese-speaking country in the region) are, to a large extent, responsible for this situation.



## THE CONTEXT AND THE MOMENTUM

A wide social awareness and debate on Brazil's educational problems and alternatives is gathering momentum. Educational innovation and reform movements are multiplying in many states and at all levels, together with efforts to identify, document and disseminate "success stories" and "effective schools". As some Brazilian authors point out, the country is undergoing an unprecedented educational renovation process, with a strong bottom-up and periphery-centre trend. The public school system is at the heart of both the criticism and the effort. Although strategies and approaches are very diverse from state to state, there are common denominators such as decentralisation, school autonomy, building of quality education demand, and education as a *right* — beyond the *need*.

International competitiveness and national pride surface easily when it comes to discussion on education issues (i.e. comparisons with Japan and with its educational system

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