



SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACHES REGARDING STREET CHILDREN IN RIO DE JANEIRO (BRAZIL) IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

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The social literature on street children, for the most part produced by NGOs, represents an effort to organize, disseminate and theorize this issue. Part of a democratic political-ideological territory, the analyses stress the socioeconomic aspects of poverty and social exclusion. Three basic themes can be identified: the family, high failure rates in school and child/adolescent labour. This literature gives us insight into one of the unpaid social debts that is a legacy of Brazil's 1964–84 military dictatorship: the plight of *street children*, that is, boys and girls who live in the streets or who make their livings through activities that take place there. The discussion must also take into account Brazil's dire economic crisis of the late 1970s. The article employs an interpretative perspective that stresses sociological, historical and cultural factors, without disregarding the economic factors that affect generalized impoverishment. It also underscores the special circumstances of the political transition from military rule to a constitutional state. The first civil government was empowered in 1984 and a new national law for children and adolescents was stated in 1990. During this period (1984–90), antagonistic social and political forces have struggled to enforce numerous projects, in an environment where repressive authoritarian strategies for social control (the police and the justice system) have clashed with democratic propositions for full-time schooling and social welfare policies.

The current political-ideological scenario: old problems, new awarenesses

In their recent interpretations regarding street children, explored in the section which follows, sociologists, social psychologists and pedagogues consider this problem to be a new phenomenon in Brazilian society, resulting from economic crisis and from the former dictatorship's repressive policies, which placed severe constraints on children and lower-class youth (whether they have committed criminal offences or not). Although we think these factors must be denounced, we believe cultural and historical aspects within the national mindset must likewise be stressed (Burke, 1992) if new paths in social policy are to be found, especially in the area of the family.

The perspective adopted in our approach takes into account historical, political and cultural aspects to analyse the problem of urban poverty, families and street children. We point out that, in the social formation of Brazil, the breakdown of family ties among poor families (one of the most important aspects on street children phenomenon) is linked to the legacies of slavery and political authoritarianism. It has not been a choice made by the lower classes, nor the natural inheritance of the Afro-Brazilian people (Cerqueira Filho, 1993; Cerqueira Filho and Neder, 1998; Neder, 1994a, 1994b). These legacies have damaging consequences in the construction of citizenship. The failure of social policies in Brazil must be sought not only on economic and social causes.

This article describes the current status of this issue by looking at some social approaches and identifying their strong points as well as their limitations. The absence of a historical perspective is one of the most relevant aspects of these interpretations.

If we examine Brazil's history, we can see that the social problems resulting from children's risk exposure date back to slavery and its legacy (Mattoso, 1988). The slave system in Brazil was characterized by a preference for the forced immigration of adult men, and it was common for a female slave to be forced to abandon her children. The slave masters did not find the idea of their slaves' reproducing themselves to be particularly attractive. Scant attention was paid to disease, to pregnant women or to children who had not yet reached the age at which they could be productive, as it was much more advantageous to import a ready-to-work adult from Africa than to raise a child. The mother was frequently separated from her children, especially when the slave worked on a plantation.

As the abandonment or neglect of children is nothing new to Brazilian society, state welfare measures in this area date from the administrative era of the Portuguese absolutist state. The creation of *Santas Casas de Misericórdia* (Houses of Holy Mercy), which cared for the infirm, aged and neglected and took in abandoned children, dates from colonial times in Brazil. The system was known in Portugal as the *Roda dos Expostos* (a revolving window where people could anonymously abandon their children

into the church's hands). Although similar homes were established in other cities in the country, it was above all in Rio de Janeiro – seat of the colonial general government from the close of the 18th century, seat of the imperial court from 1822 to 1889, and, during the republican period and federal capital until 1960 – that the *Santas Casas* earned a reputation for efficiency. They were run by religious sisterhoods and supported by important figures from the business and financial world. Charity and care for neglected children was provided by groups from the private sphere, in conjunction with indirect government initiatives. Although the overall aim was to give succour to the aged, the infirm and other needy sectors of the population, public dismay over the situation of children at risk was the main reason why people contributed to these *Santas Casas* all over the country. The ideological perspective of the welfare measures ran by the Catholic Church (from *Santas Casas* – the older ones – to many NGOs caring for street children, created in the context of the end of the military dictatorship) is based on the idea of the nuclear family with a high degree of discipline and sexual control (Foucault, 1977). It reproduces, nowadays, the same family conception of the Council of Trent (1545–63), and emphasizes the 'standard family', based on the Holy Family (Ariès, 1973). The notion of the standard family figures strongly in Brazil, even among scientists (lawyers, physicians, pedagogues, etc.) embracing the concepts of rationalism and positivism.

During the 1964–84 authoritarian military rule, proposals concerning working-class children and youth were mostly repressive, discriminatory and selective with regard to poor Afro-Brazilians. This policy was known as the *doutrina de situação irregular* – the so-called 'anomalous situation doctrine' (referring to forms of deviant behaviour). It should be pointed out that under military rule, investment in the areas of education and social welfare was directed towards buildings, facilities and human resources for 'needy children'. The educational reform forged during this period reflected a concern with modernization of the teaching system, at least in form. However, the vision of the military dictators, riddled with positivism, did not take into account psychosocial and cultural aspects that preclude the achievement of satisfactory school performance. The duration of primary school was increased from 4 to 8 years and changes were made in the curricula at teacher training schools, but no significant social results were evident.

While instruction through primary school was mandatory, educational policy did not take into account how many hours a child would actually spend in school each day. On the contrary, an emergency measure was enacted to reduce daily attendance to three-and-a-half hours so that three different sessions could be held: morning, afternoon and late afternoon/early evening. Once again it should be stressed that despite their modern-conservative preoccupations the military rulers did not pay sufficient attention to or confront the political influence of clerical conservatism, which continued to exert a substantial impact on educational and welfare policies.

The demise of the authoritarian regime caused considerable political mobilization in democratic circles, which pressed to see Brazilian legislation on the rights of children and adolescents changed. This culminated in the 1990 Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente (Statute on the Child and Adolescent), which did away with the notion that there were children in Brazil in 'anomalous' or 'irregular' situations. It should be noted that the social construction of the idea of a 'standard family', based on the Holy Family, is an attribute of clerical conservatism and also dates from colonial times.

If the statute represented the triumph of political forces within the democratic field, conservative resistance demonstrated the law's impotency. We would like to make some preliminary observations before proceeding to an evaluation of some recent studies in the fields of sociology, social psychology and social welfare on children in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who live in the streets or who find ways to support themselves there.

First, we would like to point out that conservative political-ideological discourse tended to question whether or not the law could actually be enforced, arguing that it was too advanced and sophisticated for the reality of Brazil. Turning to practical policy, we can note a tendency to sanction poverty or, in extreme cases, to physically do away with the poor within the Rio de Janeiro elite's urban environment (i.e. the town centre and beach districts). In other words, there was no strategy other than repression for controlling and disciplining urban space. Any measure that took human rights into account was viewed with suspicion.

Furthermore, the forces in the democratic field that managed to democratize legislation and unfurl the human rights banner failed to fully implement the democratic project. One of the causes of this failure is that the main forces in the democratic field have been divided, and many of the analytical texts on street children are fragmented and approach only some of the aspects of the problem. A more universal vision is sadly lacking. It is easy, for example, to come across texts and debates on street children and on childhood or juvenile delinquency that do not even touch on the question of the length of time spent in school as a potential problem. The occasional text that makes reference to the inefficiency of the public school system addresses the issue only in generic terms. Few references are made to schools where the pupil can spend the entire day. In fact, we are left with the impression that the project of full-time schools, initially suggested in the 1930s by Professor Anísio Teixeira, perished with him. We also get the impression that these recent analyses view the project of the Centro Integrado de Educação Pública (the Integrated State Education Centre, that introduced full-time schools regionally) as a genuinely novel initiative on the part of Professor Darcy Ribeiro (member of the Social Democratic Party, that governed Rio de Janeiro from the end of the military regime), and in no way connected to Teixeira.

Emphasis on the themes of family, high failure rates in school and

child/adolescent labour appears in the literature we are examining in this article. These themes have also appeared in publications by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), a government agency on population studies and data, as part of the series 'Crianças and Adolescentes, Indicadores Sociais' (Children and Adolescents, Social Indicators). The survey conducted by the Sistema de Informações sobre Crianças e Adolescentes (Information System on Children and Adolescents), founded in 1987 by the Brazilian government, is the most systematic study available published between 1984 and 1990. However, it does not deal with any specific Brazilian city, as data are grouped according to region.

We have organized the present text around the main themes identified in social approaches to street children in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the context of the transition to democracy, and stress the major authors. These authors often remark on social exclusion, whatever theme they are dealing with – family, failure at school or child/adolescent labour – a concept which has a profound significance.

The phenomena that social exclusion refers to (lack of citizenship, economic marginalization and poverty; ethnic and cultural diversities; urban zonal and social exclusion process) (Bourdieu, 1993) are not new in Brazilian society. However, they have recently arisen in Brazilian political and social thinking.

The family

In the literature on children and adolescents from the 1980s, emphasis is on social exclusion, centring on well-worn themes. Any historical approach is rather tenuous, since most ideas come from sociologists, psychologists and welfare workers. The issues that are raised and discussed are often nothing new; on the contrary, they are familiar problems that are simply brought up to date and experienced *as if* they had only recently appeared. Overall, the studies which we review tend to denounce the factor of social exclusion and indicate a concern with the social universe, leading us to classify them in broad terms as democratic. They repeatedly dwell on the consequences of military dictatorship and the deepening 1980s economic crisis as immediate causes of social exclusion. On the other hand, exclusion was the result of a social process of longer duration, whose structural framework was aggravated as much by political, social and economic effects stemming from the military regime as by the later economic crisis.

We single out for comment some of the more representative approaches taken by renowned Brazilian researchers and academics from both governmental and non-governmental institutions, in the context of the ideological struggle for legal reform: from the beginning of the civil

government (1984) and the adoption of the new constitution (1988) to the passing of the Statute on the Child and Adolescent in 1990. These legal reforms represent the effort of social movements to include in law human rights principles. At the present time, these social movements are no longer active. Consequently, books and papers on street children have become scarce.

The socioanthropological viewpoint guides other studies and reveals a critical approach to the problem of the poor and their families. Research techniques include interviews with street children (Vogel, 1991).

These sociologists emphasize the observation that the family is organized around the mother figure, and her importance is evinced in interviewees' comments. Interviewees speak of her as an idealized figure and tend to attribute their worsening situation and even their inevitable entrance into juvenile delinquency to her absence.

In the consciousness of the working poor, this change to family organization is seen as a result of poverty, misery and helplessness. Alternatives that may strike some 'progressives' as reflections of free or improved choices regarding sexual relations are viewed negatively by these poor (the fact that these alternatives may be practised in reality notwithstanding). The consequence is that the needy tend to value the 'standard' family, in which only the head works outside the home, the woman stays at home and the children remain in school until they are adults. Associated with the notion of a better life, this idea of family reinforces and encourages the internalization of the stigma attached to non-standard families by society at large.

This research (Vogel, 1991) has concluded that these lower-class families develop the view that many families begin as 'normal' but that ever worsening crises gradually transform them into 'matrifocal' families. Through new unions, individuals try to restore the unit to 'legitimate' patterns. However, these new unions fail to endure for very long, owing to the persistence of prevailing political and economic conditions. Interestingly, this anthropological approach suggests that although adverse circumstances conspire against the so-called standard family, the lower classes continue to place great value on this particular family organization.

Vogel also addresses the problems that arise with the 'betrayed childhood theory' (the author's own terminology). It demonstrates the tension that emerges between the home and the street and how the peer group manages to attract members ready to stray beyond their established territory. More specifically, it points to the need to understand the 'gangs' that manage to attract youths whose families fail to keep them at home.

The 'betrayed childhood theory' argues that the problem of exclusion occurs when a child's time is shifted primarily to work; when the time dedicated to a job begins to clash with leisure time; when more time is spent working than at home or at school; or when this exclusion is perceived as an

offence committed against the child. This offence consists of depriving him or her of time to play and study, forcing the child instead to dedicate this time to activities that will be part of his or her role in the future. This way of spending time is an unhealthy precursor to adult life.

Starting to work outside the home has a subtle effect on the morphology and dynamics of the group. The act of working outside the home can have variable consequences because, as empirical data consistently affirm, the outcome cannot be anticipated as each case is different. However, two possibilities present themselves. Starting to work may be viewed positively from the family's viewpoint, since it can improve financial circumstances and resultant earnings can be used to invest in the children's education so they can join in active economic life. There is a greater sense of cohesion. There is nothing new about this type of family organization, it occurs in various regions around the world and in different eras. In fact, down through the centuries sons and daughters have offered the guarantee of a comfortable old age or improved family income. However, the task of producing and raising offspring in today's modern bourgeois family has been wrapped in the image of affectionate and romantic relations that has led to the idealization of the mother figure (Corrêa, 1983; Farge and Foucault, 1982; Martins, 1993).

On the other hand, a negative interpretation sees the child who starts working outside the home as a threat to the family and as a detriment, not only to potential generation of income but also to the family's public image. The event is also a severe blow to the family's ability to reproduce itself as an aggregated unit.

While it may be need that sent these children off to work, within the family the term 'need' takes on a different meaning; that is, work may be seen as a need or as an act of will, a virtue and a risk. More specifically, parental actions range from suggesting, encouraging and providing guidance to keeping a vigilant eye on children and being authoritarian. Furthermore, there is a price to be paid: the time that should have been devoted to childhood. This is the 'betrayed childhood theory'. This betrayed childhood is not only an external perception but is also felt within the universe of the children who work. Some feel their parents should work harder so they do not have to work. One of the motives constantly cited to justify the need to enter the working world has to do with the problematic nature of leisure time. Many parents take the attitude that children are better off working than having idle time on their hands. While children from the middle and leisured classes attend English lessons or go swimming in their spare time, the poor child works to fill time and to learn something. Work also means staying out of harm's way and away from bad company. From the viewpoint of the household and the family logic expressed by the parents, the greatest risk is the child joining a gang. This is taken very seriously, as it means the domestic group has lost its control over the minor.

If there is a set of themes that refer to the household and, through the home, to the family – themes like violence, rejection and abandonment – then there is also the theme of the child who finds her- or himself in the street, at work or with nothing to do. In the latter situation, the family may accuse the child of preferring a spurious sociability in the street to his or her home and of trading the family for a gang. What does the alternative group offer the deserter that the family could not? The gang not only permits most activities but accepts and legitimizes them within its sphere of influence.

The studies by Corrêa (1983) and Vogel (1991) display a substantial socioanthropological contribution but the historical vision, which would permit an analysis of the effects of slavery and authoritarianism on the breakdown of family relations, is ignored. The latter type of analysis would also forestall a certain insistence on the notion of the ‘normal’, or ‘standard’ family. We can detect a certain passive acceptance of a vision that perceives a destructuring of families among the lower classes, reinforced by conservative clerical thought.

For street children, the absence of the father is a recurrent theme. Most street children have never lived with their father. But, whether the father is at home or not, the mother is the breadwinner in these low-income families. It is in these families too that one finds the highest incidence of illiterate and unemployed fathers, who have the least influence on decisions. For street children, communication with the father and the feeling that his help and trust can be depended upon reach their lowest levels. Further, these children express the greatest difficulties in their relationships with their fathers and complain the most about corporal punishment. The figure that emerges is of a father both unprepared and impotent to confront the difficulties of life and family responsibilities. Together with his emotional remoteness, this image makes him an undesirable model for his children. These circumstances facilitate children’s entrance into marginality.

There is a distinction in the perspective adopted in our research, in comparison with the literature mentioned here: in the social formation of Brazil, the breakdown of family ties is linked to the legacies of slavery and political authoritarianism. Derived from the Iberian roots that governed the ideological formation of colonial Brazil, and which continues to make its effects felt even today, the ideology of ‘granting favours’ and of arbitrary government rule played an important role in shaping what we call the ‘symbolic ignorance of the law’ (Cerqueira Filho, 1993). Expressed in the absence and/or degeneration of the father figure and the non-recognition of official law, this symbolic ignorance has damaging consequences in the construction of citizenship.

The rejection of Brazilian children and adolescents, especially those facing social exclusion (particularly accentuated in the case of criminal offenders), encourages in the social imagination an unspoken, culpable acceptance of the physical elimination of these children and youth. This

internalization of the breakdown in the law results from a complex psychological operation at an unconscious level, which coincides with the absence of a father figure or the presence of a discredited father figure.

Research conducted earlier (Cerqueira Filho, 1993) explores the symbolism of street children's nicknames, which refer symptomatically to parts of their bodies: *Barriga* (belly), *Orelha* (ear), *Beijola* (big lips), *Verruga* (wart), *Dedinho* (little finger), etc. When these children and adolescents at risk are assigned such nicknames, they serve as substitutes for a missing identity. By focusing on these psychohistorical aspects, it is possible to undertake a critical evaluation of the situation of social exclusion, shifting the balance of attention from the so-called regular (structured) family to the irregular (destructured) family.

We believe it is necessary to take cultural aspects into account when studying the social exclusion process, which places lower-class Brazilian children in a situation of vulnerability.

Data collected on different subgroups (Vogel, 1991) suggest a connection between the characteristics of family structure and dynamics and the length of time children spend on the street. Newspaper vendors and shop assistants who carry out their activities near bus and taxi stations and children who work in their own neighbourhoods tend to be more removed from the risks of street life, partly because they occupy a more geographically defined space but also because they tend to go to school. In the case of these groups, their families seem to be more structured. On the other hand, it is the street children, shoeshine boys, paper collectors and *flanelinhas* (children who look after parked cars) who suffer greatest exposure to risk, spend more time on the street and are from families that provide the least substantial reference point.

We should like once again to underscore the distinction in our interpretation of the work mentioned earlier: in the social formation of Brazil, the breakdown of family ties can be linked to the legacies of slavery and political authoritarianism. This breakdown does not represent a choice made by the lower classes, nor does it represent a natural (biological) inheritance. A socioanthropological approach should at least mention the anthropological differences of Afro-Brazilian family structures.

On the other hand, the sociopedagogical viewpoint (Brandão, 1982; Leite, 1991) raises issues related to children's growth and offers a more critical interpretation. There are two points to consider:

1. Street children have no time to be children or adolescents. In their lives, the experiences of childhood, youth and adulthood all overlap.
2. The problem of the marginalized child attains the status of an 'issue' once the child's actions begin to challenge the established order. Examples would be extreme situations of violence and criminality.

This approach (Leite, 1991) argues for the need to debate the notion that these boys and girls are unhappy because they miss having a family. What we find here is that blaming the family only serves to veil the blame that society itself should feel for damaging the lives of these children. As long as the focus is on the family, then responsibility is automatically taken away from the social environment in which 'these poor little creatures' find themselves. It is also quite evident that their behaviour represents a clear, albeit unconscious, resistance, while they are totally excluded from the collective history of their own country.

School

Research conducted by sociologists and psychologists has revealed that, according to accounts by family members, 57.5 percent of street children had already left school before they took to the streets (Rizzini, 1986). Twenty-five percent left school at the time they began their lives in the streets, and 12.5 percent after making this move. It is important to note that more than half the children had already left school before they made this change.

This psychosociological approach distinguishes 'street children' from those who live off their work in the streets. When the latter are examined, shoeshine boys and youngsters who look after parked cars or collect paper for recycling, they display a similar profile: 30.8 percent had already left school when they began work, while 15.4 percent left after.

Consequently, we can detect a clear relation between school truancy and living in the streets or finding some means of support there, with truancy preceding this move. This does not occur with the boys and girls who have jobs on the formal market, who do not leave school purely in order to work or because they are already working (the percentage that does so is quite small, in all groups). All newspaper vendors and shop assistants included in the study were continuing their studies.

Working and hanging out in the streets undoubtedly have a negative influence on these children's education, driving a significant proportion to drop out of school, while those who stay end up falling behind (the literature documents the fact that these children fail year after year). High failure rates are a phenomenon noted in most of the children studied. This perspective tends to place heavy stress on the harmful effects of work on school performance.

The children and adolescents who took part in this research study blame their absence from school more on personal and family problems than on problems at school itself. Defects in the school system, such as the lack of sufficient enrolment places for all students, are also often used as justifications for failing a grade.

Rizzini does not use a methodology that would place interviewee

accounts into a relative context. The shortage of enrolment places referred to is part of a picture of misinformation and distortion that is accentuated by the media and that encourages the population to parrot this diagnosis.

The reasons given for not going to school are the same in most cities studied. The most common reason is the need to start working, which accounts for between 20 and 30 percent of cases. The second most common reason is financial hardship, which accounts for 10–30 percent. Another significant reason is the child's pure indifference towards school: in 1986, 16.1 percent of dropouts in Rio de Janeiro, claimed they did not like their school or their teacher.

For the children who spend most of their time in the street, school is seen as important but beyond their reach. The child often reveals that he or she would like to study 'to be somebody'. When asked by the researcher, this child often denies he or she is no longer attending school, even when the researcher knows just how much time the child spends in the street. Despite what we might think, the studies show that a significant proportion of the children observed in the streets are actually enrolled in a school and attend classes to some degree. Naturally, they do not attend regularly. In Rio de Janeiro, again in 1986, 53 percent of the children interviewed in the streets stated they were attending school.

It is essential to realize that work is the great source of hope for these children and adolescents. Jobs that do not require any qualifications or only limited qualifications are their target. A much smaller proportion aspire to professions with a greater status, although they are quite aware of their own limitations.

Another issue that must be explored at this point and that is raised in Rizzini (1986) is the income earned by these children in the streets: how much do they earn from their activities and to what degree do they contribute to the family income? Likewise, we must consider the questionable activities in which these children are involved, which fall into two groups: crimes/misdemeanours and non-offences. The first group includes theft, robbery, prostitution and drug dealing. Begging and loitering, so common among street children, are examples of non-offences.

However, the number of children involved in such 'marginal' activities is much smaller than the number busy working. There are no specific data on the case of children and adolescents in the streets who systematically engage in activities involving serious crime in order to survive. But data are available on less serious crimes and misdemeanours, because of their frequency: in Rio, in 1982, drug abuse accounted for 45 percent of the cases investigated. Loitering accounted for 40 percent; prostitution complemented by narcotics abuse, for 10 percent; and prostitution alone, for 5 percent. Out of 300 children questioned, 18 percent admitted they had resorted to begging, even though it may not have been their habitual or sole source of income.

The responses from children interviewed in Rio de Janeiro pointed to a distinction between children who were *living in* the streets *definitively* and those who *lived off* the streets in the hope that there they could find a solution for the poverty threatening their very lives.

The reality these children see at school has no relevance to their daily experience on the street. Attempts to teach these experienced yet still young workers (7–10 years of age) to read seem rather naïve. Teachers talk about values such as honesty and dishonesty, cleanliness, posture, language and obedience to authority, all of which sound quite empty to the children's ears. Generally speaking, the values taught at school are relatively meaningless and respond little to their expectations.

Idealized in accordance with middle-class standards, the school, on the other hand, treats these children as problematic. They suffer the stigma of rebels, students who are hopeless, hard to teach and from a 'bad background'.

As soon as they run into problems in attempting to use the language of the school environment – often unfamiliar to their own environments and belonging more appropriately to a section of the middle classes – they are labelled dunces or 'special needs students'. By and large, the school reinforces society's view of these children, blaming them and not the form of education it offers. The result is that the child is made to feel inferior and receives no incentive to continue studying, which makes no contribution towards his or her education.

The combination of inadequate schools and an early entrance onto the workforce tends to make the schooling of these children impossible. At the very best, their school life tends to come to a halt once they have completed the first 4 years.

Another approach to this question concentrates on children between 7 and 14 who attend primary school courses regularly and explores how often they fail the school year (Demo, 1992; Leite, 1991). Specially, Demo (1992) concentrates attention on the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan region (see Table 1).

The table shows how hard it is for school to act as an agent that equalizes opportunities, considering that more than half its population had to repeat a year at least once.

These findings give rise to such questions as whether these very low performance levels can be traced solely to students' precarious financial situation. If this cause were indeed significant, then the teacher's position would have to be considered as well, given the documented fact that teachers grapple with such problems as low pay, weak political organization, difficulties in planning a career, little support from administrators and very limited training. A significant number of pupils not only have to contend with financial obstacles but also scarcely manage to attain minimal instruction.

Table 1 Percentage of failures at private and state schools in Rio de Janeiro

<i>Metropolitan region and system</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>No repetition of school year</i>	<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>Repeated 1 year</i>	<i>Repeated more than 1 year</i>
City of					
Rio de Janeiro					
State school	100	49.8	46.6	24.8	21.0
Private school	100	68.1	26.7	15.9	9.9
Rio de Janeiro metropolitan region					
State school	100	59.8	37.9	23.8	13.1
Private school	100	84.6	12.0	8.6	3.1

Source: Demo (1992).

Under these circumstances, the illiteracy problem is interpreted as a consequence not only of social structure but also of Brazilian educational policy – a national plan from which blacks, along with their values and culture, are excluded.

If we look at children of 7 years old, the Brazilian school system immediately presents two hurdles that must be overcome. The first is enrolment: the 1980s official census calculated that for every 1000 children at school age, only 550 manage to find enrolment space in the first year of primary school. The second hurdle is the problem of moving on to second grade, since 50 percent of the pupils fail first. As the reader can imagine, the latter children tend to be from poorer homes. These problems derive from inadequate teacher preparation and from the inadequate curricula, schedules and evaluation criteria used at primary schools. According to recent official data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, published in 1997, the situation has not changed much. The data show that 77 percent of the entire Brazilian school population between 7 and 14 years old had failed a primary grade more than once. Even in the most rich and developed region of the country, the southeast, where the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais are situated, the rate of failure is about 68 percent. This rate refers to a larger region than the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. Efforts have been made by the Brazilian government to change schedules and evaluation criteria as the study by Demo (1992) had suggested, but to little effect.

Generally, the curricula of the teacher training schools remain unaltered. The poor training received by state school teachers in Brazil can be seen as a product of the country's non-efficacious educational policy.

In 1971, during the time of the dictatorship, Law 5692 made the teacher training diploma roughly equivalent to a secondary-level technical school certificate. As a result, the middle classes were less attracted to these schools, which began drawing another type of clientele, that is, from relatively lower classes. The new clientele did not present the same demands with regard to educational content or quality.

Another factor contributing to inadequate teacher preparation was the loss of control over teaching material (Leite, 1991). During the military dictatorship, teachers were under pressure to obey orders from their superiors. This caused a certain disenchantment and curtailed teachers' opportunities to be creative. Furthermore, it was necessary to work longer days to make up for low salaries. Lastly, teachers tended to accept their lot passively.

Other elements seen as contributing to the failure of the school system are the curricula, length of the school day and evaluation criteria, devised for an 'ideal' pupil – whom we can interpret as a white child, necessarily excluding blacks.

For these reasons, primary school can be regarded not only as selective but also as elitist, since it sieves and excludes children from the humblest classes. It becomes a school for only 20 percent and not for the 80 percent of the population whom it should serve. It is a school that is hostile towards its own clientele. As a school for the public at large, it should recognize the situation in which Brazilian children live and adapt accordingly.

When they begin school, poor children will very likely feel they are coming from another world and that they are hovering on the edges, like a baby bird in the wrong nest. Not only are their life, culture and values not respected – they are not even recognized.

Naturally, the outcome will be failure, expressed either as acquiescence, or revolt. Either the student accepts the rules and keeps repeating the same school year over and over until the maximum age permitted (14), or he or she rebels and drops out. This second possibility is the 'more dangerous' and is of special interest to pedagogues (Leite, 1991), for it is responsible for the highly problematic situation of street children.

The question is, what feelings do these children have about school? These students view school as they view the whole of society – with deep distrust and indifference. This reverses the roles being played; first victims, these children now become the aggressors, prompting society to fear them and to demand that the powers that be adopt more efficient control measures in order to contain and repress them. It should also be pointed out that these children tend greatly to conform to the situation, as if they had no choice.

Truancy and high failure rates have been studied by Brazilian educational sociologists (Brandão, 1982). These phenomena provide a partial portrayal of the flow of pupils within the system and, according to various studies, can be related to the socioeconomic conditions of the pupils and

their families. Studies on truancy and failure rates for the first year of primary school in Brazil between 1971 and 1981 leave it clear that factors beyond the school environment, related to the socioeconomic situation of the pupils and their families, have a deep effect on school performance in terms of truancy and failure rates.

By linking the efficiency of the school system to the socioeconomic level of the pupils and their families, Brandão concludes that pupils from the lowest such levels tend to perform more poorly and are more prone to truancy. Furthermore, these children often start work when they are between 8 and 10 years of age, because their labour is needed to support themselves and their family.

Because their parents are not in a position to complement their children's school performance, Brandão shows that the school becomes the needy child's only possible source of help. As the school is unable to provide this type of support, the most common outcome is a high failure rate.

The Brazilian educational system has always displayed high dropout rates. Data collected in 1986 by the Education Ministry's Department of Basic Education support the arguments presented by Brandão. They showed that 4.4 million children in the 7–14 age bracket were not attending school. Of these, 2.3 million had begun school but had later dropped out. Highest dropout rates occur in the fifth, sixth and seventh grades (which are usually attended by students between the ages of roughly 11 and 14). This is when part of the school population has reached the age at which they are able to work and thus supplement the family budget.

High drop-out and failure rates are only some of the problems facing the educational system. Others identified include issues related to teachers, the institution itself, linguistics, nutrition and learning, mechanisms of cultural transference and the teaching of reading. Therefore, changes in truancy and failure rates cannot be linked purely to the socioeconomic level of the pupils and their families. However, research shows that the dire poverty in which millions of school-aged children and their families live does affect children's access to and length of stay and performance in the school system. Information gathered on other factors, although not extensive, reinforces the view that education is an area which illustrates social problems, conflicts and inequalities.

Despite its references to cultural problems, this approach (Brandão, 1982) does not reveal an awareness that the crux of the matter (failure and truancy rates) stems from Brazil's legacy of slavery and that we should explore other methodological territory – that is, the circular cultural exchange between Brazil and Africa – in order to find new paths and strategies that would be able to include all pupils in the a democratic school policy.

Work by children and youth

Another theme addressed in the studies under discussion is child and adolescent labour. In this section we comment on some of the studies analysing this issue.

In the families studied, this research found that the productive activities of offspring are only valued as work when they promise some financial gain (Faria, 1991; Medeiros, 1985). All emphasis is placed on the end product of work – i.e. income – because it opens up new possibilities of consumption.

A child's availability for work seems to depend on the degree of family need, which can also determine to what extent the child attends school and to what extent work will be seen as much more important than school. This factor will in many cases lead a child to simply drop out.

The shortage of openings on the official job market and, when such opportunities do exist, the discouraging salaries and lack of career perspectives in many cases prompt youngsters to seek higher returns through *biscates* (odd jobs), where activities often trespass into the area of so-called antisocial acts.

Early on in their lives, these children begin domestic work, work on the formal labour market and work in the streets, and generally take advantage of whatever money-making opportunities may arise. As they grow used to this way of life, these children tend to acquire a certain independence, thanks to their work and their freedom of movement about the city. As they further explore the urban space, they tend to distance themselves more from their families.

The child or adolescent is member of a distinct and to some extent disorganized, segmented and badly remunerated market. He or she participates at all stages and is exposed to all its problems. His or her involvement is heterogeneous and complex. An interesting feature of the minor's involvement on this market is that it varies according to their age and gender, how and where he or she lives, parental values, level of family income, opportunities available (according to economic cycle) and the search for affirmation and liberty. For most young workers, the choice between study, leisure and work is less clear-cut than it is for adults. Naturally, in a country like Brazil, where income distribution is so skewed, there is often no choice at all. Child involvement on the labour market is consequently the result of a set of forces of attraction and repulsion much more varied and complex than that which influences the adult world.

During periods of crisis, marked by low economic growth and low labour market demand, many children from poor families join the working world. Variables outside the question of labour supply behave in a contradictory fashion. Some parents welcome their children's early entrance on the labour market, while others consider it important that they start working

later, even though this may entail some sacrifices on the family's part. Gender differences – with the males' thoughts turning to work and the females' still turning more to marriage and motherhood – mean that female participation on the job market is lower in this age range. Furthermore, rates for young female participation have not increased as they have for adult females in recent years.

As for the incomes generated by these children and adolescents, almost all (90 percent) earn less than US\$70–75 (Medeiros, 1985). Although percentages have dropped, the proportion who work without earning any income (that is, as apprentices or simply so they will not have any idle time on their hands to 'get into trouble') is still surprisingly high – 40 percent of males and 30 percent of females. The proportion of those who manage to earn more than US\$140–150 (2 percent in metropolitan areas) is extremely low.

For the great majority of these young workers, the sacrifices they make in order to work are scarcely worth it when it comes to opening doors to better opportunities in the future. For most, the choice to work is not a free one. They work because circumstances compel them to do so.

In the eyes of these child labourers, work does not exactly mean being involved on the job market or having a job. Most perform services in urban areas to guarantee their very survival. They work long hours to receive little or no reward. Jobless rates and subemployment are higher than in the adult world. The competition is intense and tough, even in sectors where productivity is low and work is disorganized.

New paths for old problems

We believe it is necessary to take cultural aspects into account when studying the social exclusion process, which places lower-class Brazilian children in a situation of vulnerability. Two crucial aspects of this vulnerability must be pointed out:

First, in Brazil, the process of social exclusion has long-term structural characteristics and has forced thousands of children between the ages of 10 and 17 to enter the working world early. They are active mostly on the periphery of the formal labour market, joining the numbers of sidewalk pedlars and *biscateiros* (odd-jobbers) that are so numerous in major Brazilian cities. Therefore, in large part these children in the streets reflect part of lower-class family strategies for increasing income. They also reflect these families' socioeconomic inability to protect their children.

According to official data from the Education and Culture Ministry, average school attendance for Brazilian children is roughly 8 years – time enough for a basic formal education. However, child/juvenile labour keeps children out of school for long periods. We would also like to emphasize that

as adolescents approach the age of 15/16, their working hours reach about 8 per day. Obviously, these youngsters' school performance is affected by their forced early entrance into the labour force.

Second, we would like to stress that psychosocial and historical-cultural factors prevent Brazilian teachers from obtaining adequate professional training. The historical heritages of the colonial Iberian Inquisition and of slavery in Brazil (in effect from the 16th century until 1888) has produced cultural traits that cross centuries. The racist and traditionalist view, updated in the 20th-century republican era by clerical conservatism, underpins beliefs in the existence of a standard family pattern. This so-called standard or normal family vs the non-standard family view is behind the prejudices that cause children to drop out of school and fail year after year and that also produce indifference and disregard towards the state school system and medical care, as well as contributing to police aggression aimed at the lower classes.

The institutional arrangement of the Brazilian Republic, formed at the close of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, combined the remains of racist-slavocratic traditionalism and clerical conservatism with the new approaches of biologist racism, of social Darwinist inspiration. The entire republican institutional architecture (school, social welfare, church, police, the justice system and medical institutions, among others) was consequently based on this combination. The academic-scientific knowledge that has questioned and supplanted biological determinism (as from the 1930s) has had little influence on the professional practice of social agents working at the aforementioned institutions.

Any analysis of failure and drop-out rates must consequently evaluate the precarious professional training that teachers receive, which overlooks ethnic-cultural differences within the Brazilian social formation. A more adequate teacher-training curriculum should comprise subjects such as history of families, anthropology and sociology.

Lastly, it should be underscored that the proposal for a full-time, well-qualified state school system has been put forward in Brazil at least since the 1930s but it has met with strong (and, evidently, efficacious) political and ideological opposition from Brazil's conservative sectors. Nothing significant is new when it comes to at least two of the key points hindering enforcement of a successful educational policy in Brazil. In recent decades, child/juvenile labour has been studied as a obstacle responsible for high failure rates or drop-out rates.

Therefore, we conclude by suggesting that a major drive is necessary in order to improve the professional qualifications of teachers, pedagogues, psychologists and other agents who render services within the sphere of education, through supplementary training programmes. Such programmes should work to prepare teachers to deal with the ethnic-cultural differences that are the basis of family organization in Brazil. An educational approach

that respects differences prepares the spirit for political tolerance, from the psychoaffective point of view.

Note

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