

Education regulation as an instrument of income distribution: The case of Ceara

Marcos Costa Holanda^{a,*}, Cláudio André Gondim Nogueira^b,
Francis Carlo Petterini^c

^a *Economic Research and Strategy Institute of Ceara (IPECE), CAEN/UFC, Brazil*

^b *Economic Research and Strategy Institute of Ceara (IPECE), University of Fortaleza (UNIFOR), Brazil*

^c *Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ), Brazil*

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Abstract

The concern regarding the quality of public educational systems has become increasingly important in recent years, which is justified due to the role that education has as an instrument to promote economic development and income distribution. Since there are imperfect credit markets and other limiting aspects, the market is not able to provide education in the amounts that society desires and, therefore, the government has to intervene directly to provide the service to those who are not able to afford private education. The problem is that there is a clear disparity in terms of quality between public and private education. The private system is supposedly able to regulate itself through competition, while public education needs to be regulated by the State in order to assure minimum quality levels. In the context of the State of Ceara (Brazil), two public educational regulatory systems are compared: a public voucher system and a system based on teacher incentives. In the voucher system, competition would provide incentives to public schools to increase their levels of efficiency, but it may originate some “centers of excellence”, penalizing the least efficient schools, and weak incentives to teachers may undermine its expected results. The system based on teacher incentives, on the other hand, could be considered as a form of “positive regulation” in the sense that there will be no sanctions to the worst schools. The idea is to reward, through pecuniary benefits, teachers and principals of those schools considered the best in terms of existing levels and/or in terms of improvement in the quality of the education provided. The main argument is that a system, such as the latter may induce a healthy competition among public schools that would end up improving teaching quality and achievement.

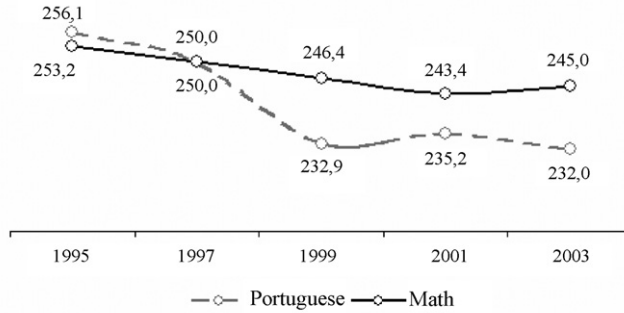
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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: holanda@ipece.ce.gov.br (M.C. Holanda), claudioandre@unifor.br (C.A.G. Nogueira), petterini@yahoo.com.br (F.C. Petterini).



Source: SAEB INEP/MEC Report. Average grades of the 2nd cycle.

Graph 1. Average grade in SAEB—Portuguese and Math.

1. Introduction

The concern regarding the quality of public educational systems is becoming increasingly important in recent years. In general, a common but yet concerning result is being observed: *the quality of public education is not improving over the years* (e.g., see Carneiro & Heckman, 2003).

In Brazil, the *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica*¹ (SAEB), created in 1995, evaluates primary and secondary students every 2 years. And, in Ceara, the *Sistema Permanente de Avaliação da Educação Básica*² (SPAECE), created in 1992, conducts annual evaluations only in public schools. They both measure the students' performances based on standardized tests in Math and Portuguese. Grades are contained in the interval between 0 and 500.

As an illustration of what is being happening in recent years in Brazil, Graph 1, presents the Brazilian average grade in SAEB during the period 1995–2003. As the graph illustrates, quality has been declining during the period in consideration.

Many factors may explain why the quality in public education has not been improving. In Brazil, educators have listed several factors, such as the poor quality of teachers, the lack of parent participation in schools, the need to enter the job market early, the negative influence of the media, drug related problems and so on.

Empirical works that have tested these hypotheses in Brazil are still scarce. The problem is that these evaluation systems mentioned before did not include a survey regarding students' academic and family backgrounds, till recently. As an example, only last year SPAECE started to apply questionnaires to the students with questions about their family backgrounds and their situation in school.

The importance of this discussion for a state, such as Ceara, one of the poorest in Brazil, is that education is one of the most important instruments to promote economic development and income distribution.³ Relevant transformations can only occur in society if the public educational system is able to give a good response in terms of quality so that students that are provenient from poorer families are able to compete with those that come from richer families and are able to afford private schools. But, many limiting factors can prevent that public schools spontaneously

¹ Basic Education National Evaluation System.

² Basic Education Permanent Evaluation System.

³ See, for example, the seminal work in Brazil written by Langoni (1974).

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