

Table of Contents

1. The Brazilian education system

5. Healthy families and ministry

The Brazilian Education System and Re-entry for Families

This information is from the combined sources of teachers working in Brazil, the UCAS 07 International Qualifications book and an interview with the Secretary of Education for Minas Gerais. The information is correct, as far as we understand it, for 2008, but situations can change very quickly and new procedures may well be put in place, especially as more Brazilian families will work overseas and return.*

**Minas Gerais is the second most populous state in Brazil after Sao Paulo, and many mission agency workers come from there. Although there may be state by state variations on some policies, precedents set in a large state like this one could be influential on policies and practices in others.*

Basic information

Academic year – follows the calendar year in common with other Southern Hemisphere countries. The age cut-off that decides which school grade a child goes into is the 30th June.

The school day is affected by the numbers of school buildings available. Half of the children attend in the morning, the other half in the afternoon. Typical times are

07:00 to 11:30

13:00 to 17:30

In some cases parents can choose morning or afternoon school for their children, but mostly the family has to work with a given allocation. It is not unusual for this to be based on the school grade; e.g. grade 6 gets the morning and grade 7 the afternoon.

There are some schools now that are offering an unbroken day from 07:00 to 17:30. As with similar school days in other countries, this is geared to situations where both parents go to work away from the home. This approach is not widespread at the moment though.

High school students may opt to study at night from 18:30 to 20:30. The quality of this kind of school tends to vary, but it does allow a teenager to work during the day and earn money towards these evening studies, but sometimes these teenagers study at night only because they do not like to study during the day.

The first level of school is kindergarten for children up to the age of 6. Kindergarten attendance is optional.

Years of compulsory schooling – ages 6 to 14, all spent in the first school.

The end qualification at the age of 14 is the Certificado de Conclusao de Ensino Fundamental. This primary schooling and the secondary schooling is administered by the states and higher education by the federal government. The federal government sets expected standards at all educational levels, but it is up to individual education authorities and state education departments how they apply the general guidelines laid down.

There are private schools which tend to push children harder academically. In the higher education sector however, the federal universities are deemed to be better than private institutions with a higher academic performance. Some of the best ones show in the world top 200. Because of this all students aim to study in the federal university.

There is a growing middle class in Brazil with expectations that their children will go to university. They are willing to pay the necessary money by sending their children to private institutions so that their children are better prepared to go to a federal university.

The secondary school consists of 3 grades and is geared to university entrance exams. Students must pass each grade in all subjects to proceed to the next grade or to enter university. In theory students can enter university as young as 17, in reality they are often older, as grade repetition and breaks in the non-compulsory secondary years are fairly common.

Compulsory subjects at school are Portuguese, Maths, Natural Sciences, Geography, History, Arts, PE, Foreign Language, Cultural Diversity, Environment, and Health. Expressive or performing arts are optional, and take place in after school clubs or lessons.

The foreign language of choice is usually English. Many people were critical of the standard of English teaching with its focus on grammar and rote learning, but did feel that things were improving with a shift in emphasis to the use of English. The standard though is very variable depending on the teacher and on the school. There are many private English language schools that help the children to reach a higher English level.

There have been major initiatives recently to push up the standard of education across the whole country. There were concerns that some areas were lagging behind others with a result that too many children were not achieving basic goals in reading and writing. The initiatives have met with a fair degree of success and in Minas Gerais state a lot more children are achieving these basic literacy skills at an earlier age. The general concern is still that children from more prosperous areas and in the cities outperform their poorer and small town counterparts.

Senior school students sit a lot of exams, which can come round as frequently as every 2 or 3 months. All of these exams must be passed to move on to the next stage. Some schools have now built in a more modular system of building up the final leaving grades in the high school qualification, but in most cases the ongoing exams are a stepping stone to the next stage.

Students will take the Certificado de Ensino Médio at the end of the secondary school and the grading is on a 1 to 10 scale with a pass mark of 5 or 6, or a letter grade from SS (equivalent to 9 or 10) to II (1 or 2) and even SR (0). This qualification at the higher levels (greater than 8) is deemed to be an appropriate equivalent to an academic (with SAT subject tests & AP) US high school diploma or A levels.

Students may also sit the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) It is designed to enable the Ministry of Education to assess national standards and isn't a qualification as such, but it is increasingly used to gain university entrance in Brazil.

Vestibular are the university examinations with their own scoring system. The minimum score for university entrance is 3 in Portuguese, 3 in one other subject (related to the proposed course of university study) and a score greater than 1 in all other subjects. In other words all subjects have to be passed, but the questions are more demanding and the required standards are higher in subjects relevant to the university course applied for. Results may well be combined with the ENEM to decide on university placement. These university entrance requirements are deemed to be broadly equivalent to GCSEs or the international version from Cambridge.

There is also another university entrance alternative, the Programa De Avaliação Seriada (PAS) spread over the 3 years of secondary education.

The Vestibular is a competitive exam system where the university places go to the students with the best test scores. It is not a case of "get the grades and enter", but rather one of allocating a set number of places – e.g. 300 places to the top 300 scorers in the tests.

The student chooses the university course and then sits a first test which produces a short-list for the second test. This first test consists of multiple choice questions on all school subjects, and generally the purpose is to reduce the numbers down to about 2 or 3 applicants per university place. In the second test the students sit essay type questions on Portuguese and 2 other main subjects related to

the area of study they are applying for at university. These are spread over 3 or 4 days and each subject area has a whole day of testing. The best scorers in these tests get the university places. As in most other countries, some subjects such as Medicine are highly competitive with about 300 first applicants per university place.

There are also a number of private universities, some of these are very good, but there is a wide range of quality. In the better ones there is strong competition, but in others it is more a question of having enough money to pay the fees.

There are good technical schools which are reasonably priced and accessible. Entry to these is decided by Vestibular exam scores, but at a lower level than the universities.

Re-entry?

For our foreign-educated Brazilians, we posed questions to the Secretary of Education about the equivalence of their foreign education and what parents need to do to have the children's school work and qualifications recognised for a return to Brazil.

Basic Procedure

Any school documents and transcripts must pass through the nearest Brazilian Embassy and be translated into Portuguese. Once the embassy approves them, they have to be stamped there. The Secretary of Education in the receiving Brazilian state will then consider the translated documents, assess the material studied, how much class and homework time was allocated to the various subjects, and the grades awarded. They will decide on a level of equivalence with the appropriate school grade/year in Brazil. There are no cases of foreign education systems that aren't recognised, but children transferring from some countries to Brazil could well end up in classes with younger children based on their school documents.

The procedure is the same for children of any age, from those who wish to go to early primary school through to university entrance. The family, rather than the foreign school, has to initiate this process.

View of different foreign systems

Brazil has relatively little experience of receiving back foreign-educated students. As our MK schools all offer either a US style high school diploma, or Cambridge International Exams, we asked about how these 2 are viewed. The answer was straightforward, in that the procedure already outlined must be followed in both cases. Both systems are viewed as good equivalents with Brazil, but all documents still need to be translated. Students who reach the end of their MK school with a diploma or CIE qualifications, would need to sit a university entrance exam in Portuguese and combine this exam with their school qualifications. Therefore, a realistic level of academic Portuguese that will cover all of the necessary skills a student needs to pass this is essential. University authorities would accept a school report/transcript with Portuguese as one of the subjects, but the proof of how good the language skills are would be in the entrance exam results.

The children will still have to go in through the competitive Vestibular system and would need to spend some time in a Brazilian school in order to do this. The implications of this are clear – the more academic Portuguese our children have when they re-enter the better. Students who enter this competitive system based on academic Portuguese, with only basic conversational level from the home, will be seriously disadvantaged and will need a long catch-up period.

Home education?

Home schooling is illegal in Brazil, but states like Minas Gerais accept home education overseas. Home educated students can take an exam in some areas on re-entry which would help place the child appropriately in the receiving school. If foreign home education systems are used, it is best to use one that is recognised and accredited and which issues documents – i.e. more of a correspondence system, rather than pure home education.

There are no home education packages for teaching Portuguese currently accessible to mission families.* A school in Rio offers this for business and diplomat families, but it is too expensive for missionaries.

**We have very recently been informed that a programme now exists and hope to be able to write more about this in the next edition.*

Other issues

1. Finances. Brazil is a middle income country with a steadily rising overall standard of living. For most people there it is low-income, low-cost country compared to many Western ones. Most of our families from Brazil will have experienced a good standard of living before joining. However, when they travel overseas the support levels required are much higher than those in Brazil. It can be difficult for churches and church members to really understand why such high levels of support are required for a family just to live, but to then add on extra costs for education is too much for some to consider. This means that most Brazilians will seek low-cost educational solutions. Decisions may well be made on the basis of affordability rather than long-term suitability.

This is a shared concern with other Latin American sending countries, South Africa, and to some extent Australia and New Zealand. Given the expected rise in numbers of Latin Americans in particular, missions and MK schools need to look at ways of supporting good educational options and of setting costs realistically for this new group, rather than just Western levels.

2. Family. The idea of boarding is alien to Brazilian family culture. Extended families and churches may resist it, even if the parents are persuaded that it is the most realistic option in the circumstances. Work can be done on CO to at least consider leaving the door open to this for older children, but this will cut across expectations of family life. It would be worth pointing out though that in situations where the extended family is thousands of kilometres away in Brazil, a decision to cut across “normal” family life has already been made. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins etc are already missing and in the mission community other workers, including those at MK schools, often fill this role. In that sense the children are still with the wider mission “family”.

3. The possibility of working with church schools to produce materials to help parents teach Portuguese at home while overseas was raised. Potentially there is a need for such materials. Currently the best option would be to call on teachers in the sending church to adopt a family and supply them with the relevant books and advice.

4. Group culture. A number of Brazilian parents mentioned how much they felt their children were gregarious and needed other children. This is a general Brazilian feature, as the adults also like to socialise widely outside of the family. For them, school is the natural place for children to socialise and they would rather have an unsuitable school with friends there than isolated home education. This difference in perception needs to be understood where Brazilians work in teams with home education enthusiasts who see things the other way round. Also any home educators in teams need to understand that Brazilians, like many others, come from a situation where home education is illegal and therefore there are no resources available other than ordinary school books.

There should be no pressure exerted on them to use English-language resources; the ones that are easiest to use are often those that don't develop the children's learning skills beyond memorisation, recall and basic comprehension. This point is made recognising that other non-Anglophones, such as some of our Korean and Chinese families, have been persuaded to go down this route.

Steve Bryant – June 2008, with editorial input from the Flechas team in Brazil

The Family and the Ministry

What priority, in your own mind, do you give to God, the family and the ministry? How do you rank those three areas of life at the moment and would, or should the ranking change if you were a prospective missionary looking at the field from afar, or a long-standing missionary who is battle hardened and weary? At one end of the scale is the position where the family is all that matters. God has given the gift of children therefore they must take priority in all situations. At the other end of the scale is the position that, because God's leading to a particular people or ministry, the "call" must take priority at all times.

As missionary families go out overseas there is a need for those parents to be helped in balancing the responsibilities of the family with those of the ministry. We believe that God is definitely first, but then comes the sticky question of which should come next, ministry or family? God has given both: He has given the parents their family and has called the parents to a ministry.

With the help of the Holy Spirit giving discernment, there will be times when the ministry must take priority over the family. At that point the parents must then be shown that there is no guilt attached to that. There are, however, other times when the family must take precedence over the ministry. Again these decisions need to be taken after prayer and with the openness to the Holy Spirit. Periodically, either family or ministry may require greater priority or focus. The key seems to be to keep either of these priorities from getting too far ahead, so causing the other to be neglected.

This can often be more easily seen with respect to the father. However, an area that also needs to be worked through by both the mission and the individual family is the role of the mother. Again there is sometimes a conflict. At one extreme are those who state that unless women are actively engaged in work of some sort they are nonentities, whilst at the other extreme are those who state categorically that the woman's role is that of nurturing the children in the home.

The need in these situations is to consider the balance. The good of the mother herself, in terms of her self worth is important. The good of the family, in terms of their care and well being is vital. The good of the people among whom she is living, so that they can hear about Jesus through the gifts that God has given her, is also important. Each of these elements must be weighed up and a solution sought.

Another area that needs consideration is that of how much the children should accompany fathers and mothers when visiting local people. The people among whom the family is working may well take the children with them wherever they go. The children, especially where the mothers are concerned, may be regarded as part of the social scene, and are an integral part of the community life. For a missionary mother to then leave her children behind when she goes to visit a neighbouring family it may seem odd or even indicate a lack of commitment to her hosts.

Local culture, therefore, may dictate a certain course of action or may even encourage the missionary to take their children as they visit people. On the other hand certain aspects of the culture and the spiritual influences within certain homes or the spiritual power that certain individuals may possess may not be appropriate for MKs to be subjected to, especially when they are at a very impressionable age. There may even be times during a visit when the missionary, having gone in good faith, has to take the child that had accompanied them away from the situation because of deterioration in the spiritual climate. It is worth taking advice from missionaries who have greater experience of the local situation as to which places, homes, people or events children should not go.

Essential characteristics of healthy families

- A God-focused family living Deut 6:1-7. Families who obviously love the Lord with all their hearts then teach their children to do the same. Their personal relationship with God is central to who they are and to what they do. Without this the other ingredients lose their meaning.

- A strong father in the home and a strong father-child relationship. One of the best ways for a father to care for his children is to demonstrate love for their mother.
- They live in an atmosphere of encouragement and affirmation, giving in terms of who they are more than what they accomplish. There are creative ways of demonstrating this.
- They have developed meaningful family rituals. Having been released from the Nazi prison camp, Corrie ten Boom was once asked, 'During your childhood years, did your father ever do anything that helped you in that difficult time of your imprisonment?' Corrie responded, 'Every night when he tucked me up, my father used to place his hand lovingly on my cheek. During those dark nights in prison, I would ask my Heavenly Father to place his hand lovingly on my cheek as my father had done.' Most families have some such rituals and they need to be continued when they are overseas.
- They show physical affection to one another. The premise that children who saw their parents showing affection to one another were more secure in their own emotional lives is strongly supported. Showing physical affection to children is equally important.
- They have fun together. Some of the most godly families are the ones who have the most fun together.
- They know the meaning of gentle, but firm and consistent discipline. Both stability and trust are built into children's lives by knowing what is expected of them and having the standards firmly in place.
- Another part of discipline is developing a sense of responsibility and wholesome work, allowing the children to learn both the rewards of accomplishment and the consequences of neglect. When families live by principles instead of by rules and every family member understands the principle behind the rules and expectations, discipline becomes less of a problem. When children are in control, they become extremely insecure because they instinctively know that they are not capable of handling that much power. They will continue to push the boundaries until they hold firm and the ensuing level of family stress becomes explosive.
- They have as a family, a deep sense of calling and commitment to the task. It is important that missionary families take time to identify their sense of calling to the mission field as a family.
- They have meaningful family, as well as personal, devotional times. Children need to know that their parents maintain a daily deep and meaningful personal relationship with God. Family devotions should be creative, varied and flexible.
- They have learned the importance of self-control for the sake of future benefit for themselves and others. A Christian home should be a place of peace and self-control.
- They work through stressful situations together. As parents learn to avoid a victim mentality and practise working through tough times along with their children. Depending on the Lord together, the children will begin to incorporate that process into their own lives.

Thanks to **Jean Barnicoat**, our predecessor in the MK Office, for this article

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