

 Brazil Institute | July 2020

WEBINAR | Back to School in Brazil: Social Distancing Edition

On July 8, 2020, the Brazil Institute and the Lemann Foundation, with the support of the AWS Institute, convened a discussion on the future of education in Brazil in a world with COVID-19, and how educators and policymakers can leverage technology effectively to allow students and teachers to return to a newly-digital classroom. To watch the event (in Portuguese), [click here](#).

Daniel De Bonis, Director of Educational Policies at the Lemann Foundation, opened the event alongside **Ricardo Zúñiga, Interim Director of the Brazil Institute.**

De Bonis mentioned a study conducted by Research on Improving Systems of Education (Rise), and its implications now that schools in Brazil and around the world have halted in-person learning due to COVID-19. The Rise researchers examined how the suspension of classes after a major earthquake in 2005 impacted Pakistani students' education. Critically, the study found that the four month gap—the period in which students did not attend classes—resulted in a loss equivalent to a year and half of schooling attainment, when compared to students with similar



socioeconomic backgrounds who were not affected by the earthquake. However, this impact was not evenly distributed: children whose mothers were more educated suffered much smaller losses in learning, exacerbating socio-economic disparities. De Bonis stressed the importance of learning from this example and avoiding this result in Brazil, through implementing measures to mitigate the impact of class suspensions that take into account pre-existing inequalities.

De Bonis also presented the findings of a Lemann Foundation survey, in partnership with Itaú Social and Imaginable Futures and conducted by Datafolha in May of 2020, on how families have dealt with online education during times of social isolation. The survey found that 74 percent of students in Brazil are participating in some sort of distance learning—through apps and online platforms, but also through video lectures broadcasted on open TV, printed materials, and more.

However, according to the survey, the number of students engaged in remote learning varies widely across regions: 94 percent of students are participating in southern Brazil, but the figure is just 52 percent in the North. Participation also varies by age group, perhaps unsurprisingly, 86 percent of high school students but just 70 percent of younger students are participating in some form of remote learning. Among students who are participating, 84 percent of them study at least an hour a day and 61 percent of middle and high school students study at least two hours a day.

School evasion is also a significant concern for remote learning. In closing, De Bonis underscored the necessity of finding ways to convince students and families of the importance of resuming the learning process, even if students are not returning to physical classrooms.

Lúcia Dellagnelo, Director and President of the Center for Innovation in Brazilian Education, opened the panel discussion by noting how quickly states and municipalities have responded to COVID-19, through designing, structuring and implementing remote learning strategies with great speed. Municipalities have also engaged in collaborative learning and information sharing. Nonetheless, she stressed challenge of existing inequalities, echoing De Bonis's remarks. She noted that there are two dimensions to this inequality: 1.) unequal access among students and teachers in terms of equipment and connectivity; but also 2.) the technical capacity of the various state education secretariats to design, structure and implement remote learning strategies. Dellagnelo mentioned that some education secretariats in lower-income cities and states had less experience with using technology for remote education, and as a result have not taken advantage of the full potential of technology during this pandemic.

She also posed a number of questions to the panelists over the course of the event, which remain relevant for policymakers to consider: What are the main characteristics of the education system's response to the pandemic? How do you envision the return to classes? What should we discard—what isn't working—and what transformations should we keep and implement on a large scale? How can we prepare teachers for

remote education, and balance the fact that some teachers will have more experience and technical expertise—and access—than others? What platforms will work best in Brazil? Where is high tech the right answer, and where will low-tech solutions be more effective?

Patricia Ellen da Silva, Secretary of Economic Development, Science and Technology of the State of São Paulo, discussed the experiences and initiatives of the state of São Paulo in responding to COVID-19. She also underscored the state's efforts to use science and evidence as the basis for policy decisions, through its São Paulo Plan—a strategy for reopening devised and updated by a group of top health and public policy experts.

In terms of education, Da Silva noted that returning students to schools is a complex matter, given that students are usually asymptomatic but can still contribute to the spread of the virus. Da Silva also added that the date for schools' reopening will be determined according to the local situation in each region of the state of São Paulo, given the state's large size and regional diversity. One of the main challenges will be figuring out how to determine who still needs to be isolated and how to maintain distances and sanitary conditions within the school environment.

She underscored, however, that when students stop going to school, they also lose a critical support system that provides a safe space, meals, and social interaction—and governments need to consider these broader elements as well when designing policies for remote education. For example, the São Paulo government created an initiative to distribute to families the money previously used for school meals, quickly and efficiently filling that particular gap.

Da Silva also argued that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of investing in education, which is essential to the economic development of a country. Within universities, some of the pandemic's effects are likely to have a lasting impact; such as the increased number of students virtually attending the Centro Paulo Souza, Latin America's largest center for technical education. Da Silva also noted the Virtual University of the State of São Paulo (UNIVESP)'s success with remote learning—as recognized by the United Nations—and that its investments in mass-scale remote learning technologies will remain after the pandemic.

Similarly, the crisis has underscored the need for nations to invest in science and technology, and Da Silva pointed to the partnerships between Brazilian universities and international research groups to produce a vaccine against COVID-19 as one example.

To conclude, Da Silva stressed the need for institutions to figure out how to guarantee a safe return to in-person learning and to combat inequalities both in remote and in-person learning.

Rafael Lucchesi, Director of Education and Technology at CNI, Director-General of SENAI/DN and Director Superintendent of SESI/DN cited some of Brazil's long-term problems and inequalities, such as declines in per capita incomes. He noted that the transition to remote learning has created new pedagogical gaps and that significant effort will be required to address educational inequalities. He argued that institutions need to view this school year differently to avoid magnifying the educational damage wreaked by the pandemic.

Lucchesi also argued that there needs to be greater emphasis on training teachers to use advanced technology in classrooms, along with ongoing feedback and support to empower teachers. Another key challenge will be to prevent increases in dropouts, through working with families and students to convey the importance of education.

In the long run, Lucchesi noted that investments in education will be critical to solving Brazil's low levels of productivity. Improving connectivity is also necessary to increase productivity. The good news is that, relative to the Brazilian education system's annual expenditures, the required investment to improve connectivity (e.g., through the creation of exclusive data channels for education) is small.

Although Brazil came late to the technology game, in terms of education policy discussions, that this pandemic offers an opportunity to revisit the educational system in Brazil. There needs to be a concerted effort to review what technologies are working and where, such as with the use of radio for teaching in the Northeast. Lucchesi concluded that Brazil already knows what it takes to have a professional education system and this knowledge that be put to use both during and after this crisis to improve education in Brazil.

Ricardo Schneider, Chief Scientific Officer of Somos Educação noted that, at the beginning of the pandemic, Somos Educação rapidly expanded its platforms so schools could operate remotely at a level similar to in-person teaching. One of its platforms, Plurall, has gone from from 300,000 students and 30,000 teachers before the pandemic to 1 million students and 300,000 teachers—and their level of use is also much higher, since Plurall is no longer just a supplement but rather the primary platform for school operations in these cases.

The elevated engagement of students and teachers with the group's platforms will create a lasting legacy of digitally-involved teachers, according to Schneider. Many teachers are embracing technology with "tremendous courage, patience and resilience" but many also feel overwhelmed by the transition to virtual classrooms. Like Lucchesi, Schneider stressed the importance of providing a high degree of support to teachers during this moment, so that they feel empowered to take an active role in learning functions.

Students, on the other hand, are often digital natives who find it easier to navigate online technologies. However, the entire school experience now takes place inside the

student's home. As a result, Schneider argued that policymakers will need to address the educational asymmetries that emerge due to students' differing home environments and varying levels of parental support. He pointed out that not all interventions need to be high-tech, citing a study that showed a half-hour nap could improve learning outcomes, and not all technology needs to be complicated.

Schneider also highlighted Somos Educação's ongoing use of the science of learning to increase student engagement with in-person and virtual educational content. He contended that education in Brazil has not yet taken full advantage of this body of scientific knowledge, but there is much to be gained from doing so. His organization intends to make the results of its projects available to public school systems to help combat educational inequalities magnified by the pandemic.

João Leal, CEO and Co-Founder of Árvore Educação, discussed the importance of making books accessible to all children, regardless of where they live. The organization's platform allows students to read both online and offline to accommodate all levels of access, and works with both private and public schools in Brazil. Leal noted that connectivity and devices vary widely across Brazil: there are classrooms without internet connectivity, students whose only source of internet is old cell phones. He argued that it is critical for technologies like Árvore Educação to meet students where they are. He also stressed that Brazil cannot wait for things to return to "normal," or pre-COVID operations, to make changes.

Leal noted that Brazil is undergoing an incredibly rapid adopting of technology in the public education system. But this rapid scaling also requires ed-techs to adjust their own operations and work closely with the public system to provide training and pedagogical advice for using their products. Árvore Educação, for example, now allows free access to users to minimize the academic impact of the pandemic. He noted that his organization has received greater outside support and interest during this period, with a large flow of donations to support Árvore Educação's mission.

Leal argued that the challenges created by COVID-19 are grounded in Brazil's long-term structural problems, from infrastructure to working conditions to connectivity. Teachers and students face real barriers on a daily basis, and technology companies and policymakers need to take these into account.

There is no "silver bullet" to fix all of Brazil's problems, but the incredible responsiveness of the education system is encouraging. Similar to the other speakers, Leal argued that this moment represents an opportunity to make lasting change, and that "technology is here to stay forever." The public sector is where ed-techs like Árvore Educação can have the biggest impact, and their challenge is to ensure all students and teacher have access and the support they need to use technology successfully.

Several key themes emerged from the discussion:

All of the panelists stressed that teachers are key to the success of remote learning. A teacher's access to technology and understanding of how technology can be used, as well as the structure of their classes, all factor into the success of learning during this pandemic. Teachers are essentially learning as they go—learning what works and what doesn't through trial and error, and improving with time. Policymakers and ed-techs can help, through providing ongoing training and support to help teachers leverage technology effectively and become more comfortable with the platforms being used.

Several of the panelists underscored the importance of investing in science and education to advance Brazil's future, as well as the need to leverage the science of learning to improve pedagogy itself. Technology is key to learning during and after this pandemic, but it needs to be used effectively. Dellagnelo mentioned that, in her opinion, one ray of hope coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic is that these students are now a generation that believes in science.


The speakers returned again and again to the theme of inequality. Questions about who has access to technology and remote learning are complicated, and as Lucchesi noted, Brazil is a large country with many types of schools. A "one size fits all" solution will not work. Nonetheless, the initiatives and ideas raised by the panelists offer paths forward, from using a combination of high- and low-tech solutions to designing policies and products that meet students where they are—on cell phones, or even offline.

Finally, Brazilian educators and policymakers will need to take an organized approach to education during COVID-19, and one that not only learns from past crises, but also constantly assesses the current strategy and adjusts as needed. The speakers all agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique window of opportunity for Brazil to revisit the education debate and take action to improve education across Brazil—and that this is an opportunity that cannot be missed.

For more information and to watch the full event (in Portuguese), [click here](#).



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