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The Brazilian Adult Literacy Programme: a brief overview and possible areas of research

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1 Introduction

In 2015 the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Brazilian Ministry of Education (*Ministério da Educação*—MEC) and Maceió's Bureau of Education (*Secretaria Municipal de Educação*—SEMED/Maceió), launched a project aimed at reducing illiteracy rates among adults in the city of Maceió. The municipality was chosen because it is the capital of the state of Alagoas, which has the highest adult illiteracy rates in the country (24 per cent). Maceió has a population of almost 1 million people, and its illiteracy rate among adults in 2015 was 8.3 per cent, which is around 0.5 points higher than the national average (Osorio et al. 2016).

One of the outcomes of the project was a better understanding of the audience of the Brazilian Adult Literacy Programme (*Programa Brasil Alfabetizado*—PBA) in the municipality. The PBA is probably one of the largest the adult literacy programmes in the world.¹ According to the Ministry of Education, over 10 million people have enrolled over the 13 years of its existence. The Ministry of Education also states that more than 3 million people learned how to read and write through the programme between 2003 and 2010 (FNDE 2005–2008; SECAD/MEC 2009–2012).

Despite its impressive scope and its potential to benefit millions of adults who do not know how to read or write, the PBA has not received the attention it deserves. In fact, to our knowledge, no systematic quantitative analysis has been conducted using the programme data. In this Policy Research Brief, we briefly describe the PBA and provide a summary of its characteristics in Maceió. The goal is twofold: first, we want to make information about the PBA more widely available; and second, we hope to raise relevant questions about the programme's effectiveness and economic and social impacts, with the goal of encouraging more research into it.

2 The Brazilian Adult Literacy Programme

The PBA was created in 2003 by the Brazilian government through the Ministry of Education, with the goal of reducing illiteracy rates among youth and adults aged 15 and above. The target audience of the initiative is youth and adults who do not know how to read or write, or who have had very limited access to schooling in the past, as well as teachers and educators who specialise in teaching those people. The programme is available nationwide and managed in a decentralised fashion. Each municipality that wishes to participate needs to individually apply to the Ministry of Education for funding. The amount of funds that a municipality can claim follows a defined formula that takes into account the municipality's own educational plan.²

The rationale of the PBA is to provide an opportunity to those who did not have access to age-appropriate schooling to learn the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Thus, the programme can be seen as an attempt by the federal government to address the inequalities and deficiencies of a schooling system that has negatively affected the poor and vulnerable population.

The programme is structured as an eight-month course, comprising a minimum of 320 hours of classes. The number of students per class should be between 14 and 25 in urban areas and between 7 and 25 in rural areas. Classes that do not reach the minimum number of students are automatically cancelled.

There are at least two ways to measure the programme's success rate.³ The first is to compare the data from the entrance and exit exams that students are required to take at the beginning and end of the course. The second is for teachers to evaluate students' performance at the end of the course. In fact, after the eight months of classes, teachers are also required to answer a survey for each of their students, which includes a question about whether the student has successfully learned the basics of reading and writing during the course. The second method is often considered worse than the first (Abadzi 2003, 11).

On the supply side, the PBA offers an incentive for members of the community to participate in the programme, by offering an allowance of BRL400 a month to those who want to teach adult literacy courses. The teacher should devote a minimum of 10 hours per week to classes. Since the work performed by teachers does not constitute formal employment, their attachment to the programme can be tenuous. In fact,

some classes are cancelled in the middle of the term due to teacher dropout. It should be noted that there is no mechanism to replace the teachers who decide to quit. As a consequence, students in these classes do not get the chance to finish the course.

In 2008 the Ministry of Education introduced the PBA Management System (*Sistema de Gestão do PBA*—SBA), which is a database that contains information on all students and teachers who sign up for the programme. It is a tool for collecting continuous and systematic information about the PBA. The information collected ranges from the demographic characteristics of students and teachers, to attendance and performance metrics. Considering its scale as well as the depth of the information collected, PBA's database is probably the only database of its kind in the world.⁴

Despite its potential to reduce illiteracy rates among young people and adults and, as a consequence, its potential to improve the economic and social status of those who participate in the programme, the actual impact that the PBA has had on the target population is not yet clear. No systematic impact evaluation has been carried out yet; therefore, it is difficult to assess the programme's effectiveness beyond anecdotal information. In addition, the data that the Ministry of Education makes available are not always systematic and continuous. Therefore, despite the existence of the SBA, it is difficult to follow the development of the programme in terms of enrolment, budget and success rates.

At the municipal level, there are many challenges that local programme managers face to keep the programme running, from overcoming bureaucratic problems that often arise when dealing with government funds, to finding ways to keep students and teachers engaged and committed to the classes, to dealing with teacher dropout. Many of the students drop out because the challenges of learning to read and write can be frustrating and stressful, on top of their already stressful lives.

In addition, local managers are not always fully backed by their local education councils. According to many managers, the education of youth and adults is often considered less important than the education of children and teenagers. Therefore, their unique requirements can sometimes be disregarded or even ignored (IPC-IG 2016).

The remainder of the article focuses on some of the characteristics of the audience that signs up for the PBA in Maceió, using data from the PBA's proprietary management system—the SBA—made available through the partnership between the UNDP, IPC-IG, MEC and SEMED/Maceió.

3 The Brazilian Adult Literacy Programme in Maceió, Alagoas

While the discussion in this section focuses on the data available from the PBA in Maceió, it is likely that some of the insights contained here can be applied to other municipalities that also participate in the programme.

Table 1 gives a general overview of the PBA in Maceió since 2011. It shows the number of students who signed up for the courses, each year's success rate, the number of classes that were held, the number of classes that were discontinued and the number of classes that failed to reach the minimum number of students to begin with. As we can see from the table, the number of students enrolling in the PBA has declined significantly in Maceió since 2011: from about 9,000 students in the first year of the series to fewer than 3,000 students in 2015, the last year for which data are available.

According to assessments by teachers, the success rate of the programme varied between 30 per cent and 50 per cent for the years analysed. Regarding the availability of classes, between 2011 and 2015, about 11 per cent of all classes either never started or were discontinued before the term was completed.

Despite the many operational challenges that local managers face in implementing the PBA (as mentioned in Section 2), the programme's grassroots outreach capacity is remarkable. Figure 1 shows that around 92 per cent of the almost 24,000 people who signed up for the classes since 2011 declared they had never attended school in the past. These numbers not only show that local managers in Maceió are able to reach the programme's target audience but also highlight the challenges faced by both students and teachers.

For those who enrol in the programme, it is a challenge to become a student for the first time. For example, the school environment is so new to many of these students that some need to develop the basic motor skills to adequately hold a pen. Only after acquiring such skills can the students begin the process of learning to read and write.⁵ For teachers, the challenge is to make the process engaging while keeping the students motivated, to help them overcome the frustration that may accompany the process of learning. Not surprisingly, the programme has a high dropout rate among students.

Table 2 indicates the attendance rates for the programme throughout all the four years analysed. As we can see, more than 40 per cent of the students attended 25 per cent or less of the course. Given the few incentives designed to keep students motivated, it is not surprising that so many end up attending less

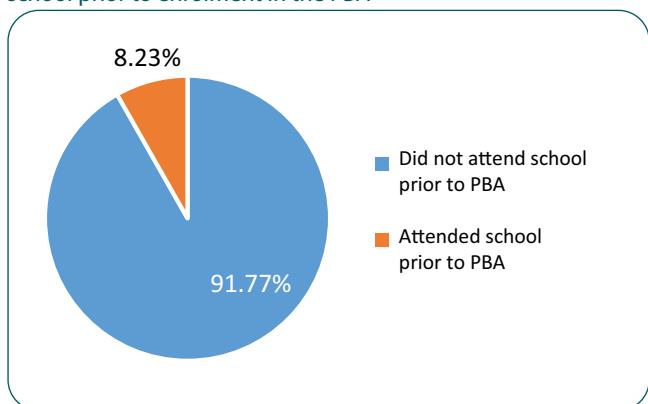
TABLE 1
Student enrolment, success rate and number of classes held and discontinued

Year	Student enrolment	Success rate (per cent)	Classes that were held	Discontinued classes
2011	9,012	51.8	482	89
2012	5,630	28.81	312	36
2013/14	6,436	33.86	361	32
2015	2,823	42.05	168	11
Total	23,901	40.4	1,323	168

Source: SBA Management System (2011, 2012, 2013-14 and 2015).

FIGURE 1

Percentage of students who have attended school prior to enrolment in the PBA



Source: SBA Management System (2011–2015).

than a quarter of the programme. It is also noteworthy that just over 23 per cent of all students who signed up for the courses attended more than 50 per cent of the classes.

TABLE 2

Class attendance

Attendance rate	Number of students	Percentage of all students
Up to 25%	9,146	41.24%
Between 25% and 50%	7,827	35.29%
Between 50% and 75%	4,366	19.68%
More than 75%	841	3.79%
Total	22,18	100%

Source: SBA Management System (2011–2015).

Table 3 shows the demographic characteristics of the students who have attended the PBR in Maceió. The largest proportion of students (36.28 per cent) are between 30 and 44 years of age. The second largest age group is 45–59 years (29.26 per cent). The average age for all students is 44, and the standard deviation is of 14.95 years. Data show that 34 per cent of the students are male, while the remaining 66 per cent are female. In terms of ethnicity, over 66 per cent of the total number of people enrolled in the programme declare themselves to be mixed race (*pardo*).

We can also compare the information on students enrolled in the PBA with the adult illiterate population in the city of Maceió. Using data from the 2010 population census, we find that women comprise around 56.3 per cent of the illiterate population of the city, while immigrants represent 62 per cent of the illiterate population, and individuals between 15 and 44 years old represent about 43 per cent. Looking at 2011 data from the PBA, we see that these groups represent, respectively, 65 per cent, 53 per cent and 25 per cent of the students enrolled in the programme (Osorio et al. 2016). Thus, it is interesting to note that the PBA seems to be more appealing for groups with specific demographic characteristics.

Understanding the reasons behind this phenomenon would likely increase the programme's chances of increasing its outreach. In fact, when considering 2011 enrolment rates, we find about 9,000 enrolled students (at least formally). This represents less than 9 per cent of the total number of

illiterate adults in Maceió, according to the 2010 population census (*Ibid*). It is important to note that, over the years, the number of students enrolling has declined.

TABLE 3

Demographic characteristics of the Brazilian Adult Literacy Programme in Maceió

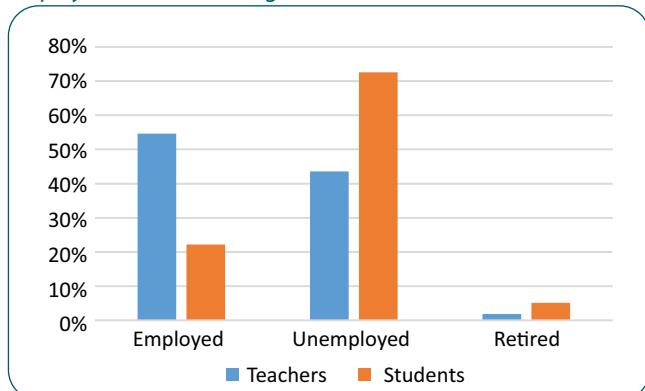
Age	Number of students	Percentage of total students
15–29	4,275	17.89%
30–44	8,672	36.28%
45–59	6,993	29.26%
60+	3,961	16.57%
Gender		
Female	15,773	65.99%
Male	8,128	34.01%
Race/ethnicity (self-declared)		
Yellow	2,335	
White	3,394	14.20%
Indigenous	207	0.87%
Black	2,034	8.51%
Mixed race (<i>pardo</i>)	15,931	66.65%
Place of birth		
Born in Maceió	18,128	75.85%
Not Born in Maceió	5,773	24.15%

Source: SBA Management System (2011–2015).

Finally, we analyse the employment status of students and teachers who participate in the programme. As Figure 2 shows, about 44 per cent of the teachers who participate in the programme declared themselves to be unemployed, while around 72 per cent of the students declared the same. The percentage of retirees among both students and teachers is low: around 5 per cent of students and less than 2 per cent of teachers.

FIGURE 2

Employment status among teachers and students



Source: SBA Management System (2011–2015).

Since the programme targets illiterate adults, who are at the low end of the labour market skills distribution, it is not surprising that many of the students have a loose attachment to the labour market. In other words, one could reasonably expect the rate of unemployment among the programme's target population to be

high. In addition, it should also be pointed out that most of the students enrolling in the PBA are women, who are often in charge of household chores. Thus, despite not engaging in paid labour, this group of students is likely to be occupied most of the time.

In sum, this section aimed at portraying a general overview of the group of people who sign up for the PBA in Maceió. As we saw, most of them are women, the average age of the group is 44 years old, the vast majority of people in the group declare themselves as being of mixed race (pardo), and the programme mainly attracts those who were born in Maceió. In addition, we also saw that the majority of the students were unemployed at the time of enrolment, and that a high percentage of the people who apply for teaching positions in the programme were also unemployed.

4 Conclusion

To the author's knowledge, the PBA is one of the largest programme of its kind in the world. The initiative can be considered a positive step towards fixing inequalities that have negatively affected the poor and vulnerable population in the past and continue to do so. As demonstrated, over 70 per cent of people who enrolled in the programme were unemployed, which highlights their economic exclusion.

On the operational side, the programme has many barriers to overcome. As previously mentioned, local managers often find themselves lacking the necessary support to carry out basic activities. In addition, there seems to be a general disregard within local school boards for adult literacy programmes. Despite the operational challenges that the programme faces at the local level, there needs to be a better understanding of its impacts on the target audience. There are at least two important questions that need to be tackled: first, what is the success rate

of the programme? In other words, how effective has the PBA been in achieving its primary goal, which is teaching youth and adults to read and write? Second, how does adult literacy affect an individual's economic opportunities and employment status in the formal labour market?

These questions can only be answered after a more in-depth analysis of the programme. Thus, it would be desirable to see further studies that shed greater light on its effectiveness and impacts on participants. The first question can be answered through detailed analysis of the monitoring data that the programme has compiled over the years. To answer the second question, one would ideally find an exogenous source of variation so that causality can be inferred. ■

1. For an exhaustive list of adult literacy programmes worldwide, see UNESCO (2016).

2. The formula is given as: $VA = \left[\left(\frac{A_r}{10} \times 400 \times m \right) + \left(\frac{A_u}{20} \times 400 \times m \right) \right] \times 0.5$
Where:

VA= total amount of funds that the municipality can claim; A_r = number of students in rural áreas; A_u = number of students in urban areas; 10= reference value: average number of students in classes in rural areas; 20= reference value: average number of students in classes in urban areas; 400= value of the stipend received by teachers; m= number of months of the programme.

3. Percentage of students who successfully learn the basics of reading and writing among all students who enrolled in the programme.

4. The ideas for building the database system came from a partnership between Brazil's Institute for Applied Economic Research (*Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada*—Ipea) and the Ministry of Education (*Ministério da Educação*—MEC). For more details about the reasoning for this, see: Henriques, Paes de Barros, and Azevedo (2006).

5. This was mentioned by many local stakeholders who are actively engaged with adult literacy programmes. See IPC-IG (2016).

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