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ensaio@cesgranrio.org.br

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Reiter, Bernd

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Education reform, race, and politics in Bahia, Brazil

Bernd Reiter*

Abstract

This article discusses the main findings and conclusions from my field research evaluating education reform in the state of Bahia, Brazil. Data collection was done during two exploratory research trips to Salvador, the state capital, in 2001 and in 2005. The Bahian Education Reform, initiated by the state government in 1999 and funded to a great extent by the World Bank, has achieved some very significant goals, most importantly the expansion of high school education and the broadening of access to primary education in areas where access was far from universal. My research nevertheless points to some severe shortcomings, namely with regard to the situation of Afro-Brazilians. Structural racism provides one of the strongest explanations for this shortcoming. Structural racism in Bahia lowers teachers' and principals' expectations about the potential for academic achievement of poor Afro-Brazilians; structural racism widens the gap between students and principals, contributing to a mutual alienation of these two groups and jeopardizing the creation of strategic alliances and synergies inside schools; and it alienates schools from neighborhoods, impeding meaningful community and parental involvement in school management. Finally, the low recognition that public teachers receive from society as a whole, reflected by low salaries, and a general lack of institutional incentive structures that reward outstanding performance and sanction under-average performance have transformed Bahian public education into a desperate system, where the motivations of teachers and students are systematically grinded and their hopes frustrated.

Keywords: Education reform. Racism. Exclusion. School management. Popular participation.

Reforma educacional, racial e política na Bahia, Brasil

Resumo

Este artigo discute as principais descobertas e conclusões de minha pesquisa de campo avaliando a reforma escolar no estado da Bahia. A coleta de dados foi feita durante duas viagens exploratórias a Salvador, capital de estado, em 2001 e em 2005. A reforma educacional baiana ("Educar para Vencer"), iniciada pelo governo do estado em 1999 e financiada em grande parte pelo Banco Mundial, alcançou algumas metas muito significativas, a mais importante sendo a expansão do sistema de educação de segundo grau

* Professor Assistente da Universidade do Sul da Flórida; Ph.D. Graduate Center, City University of New York.
E-mail: reiter@iac.usf.edu

e a ampliação do acesso à educação primária em áreas onde tal acesso era longe de universal. Minha pesquisa também aponta para algumas falhas desta reforma, em particular referente à situação de afro-brasileiros. Racismo estrutural é uma das causas mais indicativas desta falha. Racismo estrutural na Bahia reduz as expectativas de professores e diretores do potencial acadêmico de afro-brasileiros pobres; isto amplia o abismo entre estudantes e diretores, contribuindo para uma alienação mútua destes dois grupos e põe em perigo a criação de alianças estratégicas e sinergias dentro de escolas; o racismo ainda aliena escolas dos seus bairros, obstruindo um envolvimento significativo da comunidade na gestão da escola. Finalmente, o reconhecimento baixo que professores públicos recebem da sociedade como um todo, refletido por baixos salários, e uma falta geral de estruturas institucionais de incentivos capazes de recompensar desempenhos excelentes e sancionar desempenhos deficientes transformou a educação pública baiana num sistema desesperado, onde as motivações de professores e estudantes são sistematicamente negadas e suas esperanças frustradas.

Palavras-chave: Reforma educativa. Racismo. Exclusão. Gestão escolar. Participação popular.

Reforma escolar, racismo y políticas locales en Bahia, Brasil

Resumen

Este artículo discute las conclusiones principales de mi investigación en la que evalué la reforma escolar en el estado de Bahia, Brasil. La recolección de datos fue realizada durante dos viajes exploratorios de investigación a Salvador, la capital del estado, en 2001 y en 2005. La Reforma Educacional en Bahia iniciada por el gobierno del estado en 1999, y financiada en gran parte por el Banco Mundial, ha alcanzado algunos logros importantes como: la expansión de la educación secundaria y la ampliación del acceso a la enseñanza primaria en áreas donde el acceso previo estaba distante de ser universal. No obstante, mi investigación enfatiza en puntos deficientes con respecto a la situación de los afro-brasileños. El racismo estructural proporciona una de las explicaciones más significativas de esta deficiencia. El racismo estructural hace que maestros y directores mantengan muy bajas expectativas acerca del potencial logro académico de los afro-brasileños pobres; el racismo estructural amplía la brecha entre estudiantes y directores, contribuyendo a una enajenación mutua de estos dos grupos, arriesgando así, la creación de alianzas y sinergias estratégicas dentro de escuelas y enajenando las escuelas de los barrios, impidiendo así la participación significativa de la comunidad en la administración de la escuela. Finalmente, el bajo reconocimiento que maestros públicos reciben de la sociedad en general, reflejado en salarios bajos, y en la falta de estructuras institucionales que estimulen y recompensen el desempeño sobresaliente y sancionen el desempeño deficiente ha transformado la educación pública de Bahia en un sistema de desespero, donde las motivaciones de maestros y estudiantes son negadas sistemáticamente y sus esperanzas frustradas.

Palabras clave: Reforma educacional. Racismo. Exclusión. Administración escolar. Participación popular.

Introduction

This paper presents and discusses some of the preliminary findings of my research on educational reform in the state of Bahia, Brazil. Data collection was done during two exploratory research trips to Salvador, the state capital, in 2001 and in 2005¹. My aim in this paper is to gain a nuanced picture of the successes and shortcomings of this reform. Of special interest is an analysis of the quality of parental and community participation in school management and an assessment of the ways racism impacts the learning experiences of students in Bahian public schools. The broader research interest driving this inquiry is to determine if the Bahian school reform, initiated in 1999 and still being carried out at the time of writing this article (2005), is improving the situation of historically marginalized groups, especially Afro-Brazilians. The research carried out so far has not provided enough reliable data to answering this question conclusively, but it clearly points to some difficulties and shortcomings of this reform, while also highlighting the directions of further, more systematic, inquiry.

Method

As stated in the introduction, the main research question motivating this study was to determine if the Bahian school reform is improving the situation of historically marginalized groups of Brazilian society, especially Afro-Brazilians, by combining quantitative with qualitative research tools. Specifically, this paper seeks to expand the complexity of the analysis of the quantitative data available to include such indicators as the frequency and type of parental participation, the type of community interaction, and an assessment of how racism impacts the academic performance and learning environments in Bahian primary and secondary public schools; add qualitative components to the existing quantitative data to analyze democratic school governance and the ways racism influences school and classroom realities and learning experiences; and finally to extend the unit of analysis beyond classrooms and schools by comparing public schools with private schools diachronically, that is before and after the reform, and synchronically, across different school systems - public and private.

In addition to collecting statistical indicators on school performance, such as changes in grade averages, age-grade distortions, promotion and repetition rates, and indicators of academic achievement, all readily available through the several surveys done by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) and the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), I carried out on-site participatory observation in the schools of my sample, and conducted 60 interviews with key stake holders involved in Bahian schooling, amongst students, teachers, parents, principals, community leaders, and different policy makers of the state and municipal levels.

The context under which I carried out research is marked by extreme inequality that is supported by pervasive ideologies created to justify this state of affairs,

¹ This research was carried out jointly with Rita de Cassia Dias, supported by the Howard Samuels State Management and Policy Center, New York, and generously financed with several grants from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.

correlating it with skin color. Being a white European male myself necessarily influenced my interviewees and structured the interview situation, as to some interviewees I represented the embodiment of white male domination. I tried to take account of this problem by comparing and discussing my own findings and impressions with those of my co-researcher, who is a local, black female. The fact that I have been involved since 1992 in different Bahian social movements and NGOs helped to facilitate my access to some otherwise exclusive environments and it added to my credibility as a committed and serious researcher.²

The sample

During my first research trip, we regularly visited six public schools, four of which were administered by the state and two by the municipality. All four state schools offered fifth to eighth grades and two of those also offered high school education, i.e. grades nine to eleven. One municipal school offered first to fourth grade only, whereas the other offered grades one to eight. The community school offered pre-school and grades one to four. In 2005, we returned to one state school offering grades five to eleven and to one municipal school offering grades one to eight. We also continued researching the community school and included four new schools into the sample.

We sought to gather a sample that reflected the variety of school types of the Bahian educational system. Two schools of the 2001 sample, one state and one municipal, were presented to us by the respective administrations as "model schools," which meant schools where education reforms were actively carried out and had produced some initial results. We selected the other four schools randomly to reflect the different types of schools in the Bahian system. The sample-changes in 2005 resulted from the need to broaden the sample and get information on schools in different neighborhoods. We therefore designed our sample to take account of the existing variety of school types (grades 1 to 4 with and without preschool, 1 to 8, 5 to 8, 5 to 11 and 9 to 11), administration types (state, municipality, and private), and geographic location. In addition, we also included one private elite school into our sample to serve as a control school. In addition to these public schools, we included two private schools in our sample, one run by a local neighborhood association and one elite school run by the Jesuits in order to compare the two systems and the ways the Bahian Education Reform is impacting both. Our findings therefore represent typical cases and as such they allow highlighting problems that potentially affect more, if not all, Bahian public schools. At this point, (November 2005), we have not been able to carry out a systematic assessment to test if this is in fact the case.

School failure and reform in Brazil and in Bahia

Brazil's educational system is lagging behind most other Latin American countries. A World Bank study comparing Latin American and Caribbean primary educational systems, published in 1994, found that only Haiti had a lower rate of conclusion of

² I was a student at the Federal University of Bahia from 1992 to 1993. During 1995 and 1998, I worked for several well-known local NGOs and, during the same time, I was also a consultant for different international aid organizations, which brought me into contact with several of the neighborhoods and community organizations I later researched.

primary education and that Brazil was last on the list if the rate of students that concluded primary education without having repeated was considered (WOLFF; SCHIEFFELBEIN; VALENZUELA, 1994). The Brazilian adult illiteracy rate in 1996 was 14.7 percent (31.5 percent for people over the age of 50) and for the northeast, this rate was 28.7 percent (52.7 percent for people older than 50). In comparison, the Brazilian south and the southeast had an adult illiteracy rate of 8.7 percent (22 percent for people over 50).³

Brazilian whites had reduced their overall illiteracy rate from 11.9 percent in 1991 to 9 percent in 1997. Brazilian blacks, in contrast, had an illiteracy rate of 31.5 percent in 1991 and were able to reduce it to 22.2 percent in 1997.⁴ In terms of medium years of study, the Brazilian population had achieved an average of 6 years in 1996, but the northeastern adult population only averaged 4.4 years (PNUD; IPEA, 1996; IBGE, 1995, 1996B).⁵ The same was true for accessibility to schools and for the educational attendance of the population in school age.

Table 1 - The Northeast lags behind on almost all accounts.

Indicator	North	Northeast	Southeast	South	Center-West
Illiteracy rate of adults – 1996	11.6	28.7	8.7	8.9	11.6
Promotion rate – 1 st grade – 1997	43.0	45.0	83.0	75.0	58.0
Repetition rate – 1 st grade – 1997	55.0	53.0	16.0	25.0	41.0
Age/grade distortion – 1 st grade – 1998	51.2	54.1	14.7	10.5	25.1
Percent of teachers with university degrees – 1998	17.3	24.1	63.1	61.2	47.6
Expenditure/student/year, fundamental cycle (1995)	302	278	608	535	457

Source: Quoted from Castro (1999 apud VERHINE; CARVALHO, 2000).

In the Metropolitan region of Salvador in 1996 only 15 percent of the population 20 years and older had more than four years of education (IBGE, 1996a). Accordingly, in 1996, 85 percent of metropolitan Bahians had not completed the elementary educational cycle and were considered, by Brazilian standards, “functionally illiterate.”

In 2000, at the onset of the Bahian Education Reform (*Educar para Vencer / Learn to Win*), repetition rates in Bahian public elementary schools were 67.7 percent, compared to a national average of 43.7 percent (BAHIA, 2001). 1999

3 From: IBGE (1996b). Data does not include the rural populations of the North.

4 This number was exactly the same for individuals declaring “negro/a,” and “pardo/a” (brown), following the IBGE convention. I use the term “black” when adding the numbers of “negro/as” and “pardo/as.” Data from: IBGE (1991). Data does not include the rural populations of the North.

5 Does not include the rural population of the Northern Region.

statistics indicate that students in Bahian public schools repeated on average three times before graduating from 8th grade, compared to one time nation wide.⁶ Data on repetition, age/grade distortion and dropout, together with the Bahian school coverage of only 90 percent for 7 to 14 year olds show that Bahian students, 85 percent of which attend public schools, were relatively unlikely to complete 8th grade. In fact in 1994 only 10 percent of 1st grade matriculates concluded 8th grade in Bahia. In 2000 this number had risen to 20 percent. But graduation by no means guarantees sufficient preparation. According to the 2001 evaluation of the quality of basic education (grades 1 to 11; elementary, middle, and high school), carried out by a federal organ (SAEB), 50 percent of Bahian 8th grade graduates leave school without having acquired sufficient basic skills.⁷

Education reform in Brazil and in Bahia

To improve this situation, the state of Bahia, in the poor and predominantly black northeast of the country, initiated a state-wide reform of its ailing school system, backed by two loans from the World Bank, totaling 129.6 million dollars. After completing the first phase of this project in June 2003, the responsible World Bank team found that the overall achievements of the reform were "highly satisfactory." The successful completion of phase one opened the doors for a second loan in order to continue and expand this reform until its final completion in July 2006 (WORLD BANK, 2003).

This reform is carried out in the midst of much broader changes of the Brazilian educational system initiated in 1996. Then president Cardoso and his minister of education, Paulo Renato Souza, enacted a major shift in the education budget away from university education to primary and secondary education, several federal programs to support schooling of children of poor families, and they approved affirmative action admission policies by several universities.⁸

The new educational law of 1996 redefined educational priorities and opened the way for changes in the national curriculum guidelines, school management, parental and neighborhood involvement, school autonomy, and school finance. One crucial element that has shown to have significant influence was the FUNDEF (State Fund for the Maintenance and Development of the Fundamental Cycle and the Valorization of Teachers) in the same year. The FUNDEF was designed to achieve two goals. To attack the enmeshing of municipal and state authorities that has historically blocked a rational organization of education. And to provide fiscal incentives for municipalities to provide for pre-school and fundamental education, as FUNDEF guarantees a minimum amount of money (315 Brazilian Reais / 140 US dollars in 2001) for every enrolled student in the municipal system. For poor municipalities this law provided incentives to enroll as many students as possible, resulting in increased municipal budgets. As a result, a tendency was set in motion

6 Data from the Brazilian Ministry of Education – MEC, and INEP (1999), and Villela (1997).

7 This information comes from the yearly evaluation of educational performance, SAEB.

8 Up until then, education budget gave undue eight to university education, as thoroughly discussed by Plank (1996).

for municipalities to effectively take over the educational responsibilities that the older 1988 law already required. As a direct result of FUNDEF, Brazilian municipalities have augmented their participation in providing for fundamental education from offering 37.20 percent of all the matriculates in the fundamental cycle in 1996 to 51 percent in 2000 (RODRIGUES; GIAGIO, 2001).

It is important to notice that the state of Bahia only started its educational reform in 1999, when it received the first part of the World Bank loan. In Bahia, more than in any other state, high repetition rates were "jamming" the public school system, as elder students did not move on to open vacancies for new students. Investing in educational quality therefore promised to reduce educational costs, as achieving better teaching quality promises to fight repetition and therefore liberates the system of repeaters. Whereas for the Bahian state investing in basic education promises to save money and promote growth in the medium and long term, for the World Bank, investing in education is equally good business.⁹

Fishlow (1972, p. 395) had demonstrated early that "past illiteracy and present poverty are strongly associated" and such authors as Nancy Birdsall and Richard Sabot (1996), editing a book on education in Brazil (and published by the Inter-American Development Bank), David Plank, Amaral Sobrinho, and Xavier (1996), and Laura Randall and Joan B. Sabot (1999), have stressed the macro-economic effects of investing in primary education, demonstrating that countries that had invested into their educational systems in the 1970s fared very well economically ten years later, whereas those countries that had neglected investing in the educational levels of their population were facing economic problems.¹⁰ Economic reasoning therefore must be seen as providing one major motivation for countries to improve the educational levels of their population and for lending institutions to provide loans for educational reforms.

But economic reasoning bears some inherent pitfalls, especially if applied to education, potentially jeopardizing the success of school reforms. As Kohn (2000) has convincingly argued, if economist set the frame under which school reforms will be carried out, there is a great risk of losing sight of those goals that are not readily commensurable, not cost-efficient, not promising a quick economic return, or not directly related to narrowly defined educational achievements and outcomes.¹¹ There are two main problems resulting from narrow economic reasoning if applied to education.

First, such an approach is unable to account for the importance of education in furthering democracy, and secondly, it does not respond to issues outside of

⁹ Path breaking works by economists Jacob Mincer (1958) and by Gary Becker (1963) offered a method to calculate the profitability of investment in education, were receipted quickly by the World Bank, making it the world's largest external funder of education reform (according to the bank's own statements in 2003). Especially investing in primary education, most studies agree, have a high rate of long-term economic return because it raises human capital, associated with individual levels of cognition and motivation. The work carried out by and World Bank employee (1981-1998) George Psacharopoulos provided a corner stone in this rationale, demonstrating the positive marginal economic returns on the individual level resulting from investment in education, e.g. Psacharopoulos (1994).

¹⁰ Young-Bum Park, David Ross and Richard Sabot in their contribution to the book edited by Birdsall and Sabot (1996, p. 277) compare Brazil with South Korea and find that "in Korea the labor market consequences of educational expansion account for over 90 percent of the market improvement in the distribution of wages that occurred over the decade."

narrowly defined academic achievements, especially those of race and gender equality and multiculturalism. Issues of race, gender and democracy are not directly connected to calculations of economic efficiency and academic achievement and they extrapolate the instrumental aspects of education.

In fact, education and democracy are intimately connected as injustices are reproduced in classrooms, and so are the ideological justifications that back them up. This is because education is the place where a hegemonic common sense that justifies exclusion is anchored and socialized into the consciousness of future generations. It is also one of the main societal places where privileges are created and distributed. As Fred Hirsch (1977) has demonstrated, privilege is a scarce resource and therefore relational, requiring underprivilege as a background and contrast. As a result, at the same time that privilege is created and maintained, underprivilege is also reproduced. Tracking as a mechanism to perpetuate privilege on the one side and to allocate stigmatization, curtailing of expectations and exclusion on the other, happens within classrooms, within schools, and among different schools and school systems.¹²

Race and gender serve as markers to justify the reproduction of underprivilege and exclusion. In most parts of the world, whiteness is traded as a property and as a symbol that signifies achievement and normalcy against which non-white people are constantly measured and compared, a process that produces intricate systems of discrimination (FINE et al, 1997). The mechanisms that produce such discrimination work at two distinguishable levels. First system-wide so that whole schools and even school systems tend to reproduce the unjust distribution of privilege. In many countries, public schools have developed into places where exclusion is reproduced against the background of private school systems for the rich that set them apart through high quality education. But discrimination also occurs inside schools and classrooms when students, teachers, administrators, and the didactic material at use reproduce culturally biased versions of merit and normalcy, excluding the experiences of underprivileged groups and therefore aggravating their marginalization.

Empirical findings: general achievements

The Brazilian school reform initiated under president Fernando Henrique Cardoso and coordinated by minister of education Paulo Renato Souza was successful in broadening access of the Brazilian population in school age (7 to 14) (LAMOUNIER; FIGUEIREDO, 2002). In 2000, 97% of this population was attending school, compared to 85% in 1989, although rates for the northeast were significantly lower, where school attendance reached 90 percent by 2000 (IBGE, 2003). The FUNDEF law turned out to be a very effective tool for decentralizing and bringing order into a system that has been suffering from many overlapping responsibilities and blurred boundaries for municipal and state action. FUNDEF was so successful, because it guaranteed minimal financial conditions in schools,

11 Kohn (2000, p. 93ff) has referred to such an approach as a "demand model" of school reform where targets and standards are imposed top-down, ignoring the needs of students and parents.

12 Analyses include Anzaldúa (1987); Fine et. al. (1997), and Stanton-Salazar (2001).

as federal transfers are calculated based on the number of students enrolled.¹³ President Cardoso's was also able to counterbalance the undue weight of university education, consuming over 50% of the Brazilian educational budget until then and severely under-financing primary and secondary education (CAIXETA apud LAMOUNIER; FIGUEIREDO, 2002, p. 548). Overall, high school attendance rose by 71% from 1994 to 2001 – which must be seen as another significant success of the Cardoso reform (INEP, 2002).

The elaboration and application of new national curricular guidelines are another important achievement of the Cardoso administration, although the high standards of those guidelines mostly met very distant local realities. In most schools of my sample, teachers openly admitted that they were unable to teach at such high standards.

From our analysis of Bahian public schools it also became clear that the teacher-training programs that are part of this school reform are gradually improving teachers' qualifications. The new law requires that all newly hired teachers of primary and secondary cycles hold university degrees. Teachers without university degrees were offered opportunities to attend university. This requirement will impact the quality of Bahian public schooling gradually, as newly hired teachers are better prepared than the already working personnel. The same is true for the qualifications of principals. It is part of the Bahian school reform that in the municipal system, the school community (defined as being composed by one representative from each of the following: parents, community, teachers, staff, and students) elect principals. In the state system, principals must pass several competitive tests in order to be eligible for the job. Comparing schools with active and well-informed principals to such with disinterested ill-prepared ones clearly shows that well-informed, well-trained, and committed principals can make a difference for their students and teachers. Such principals have been able to make use and effectively apply educational reform programs, whereas others did not carry out certain parts of the overall reform because they ignored their existence or were unwilling to make the effort.

Municipalization and fighting repetition

Comparing the municipal with the state system in the city of Salvador, Bahia, it became evident that municipalization had overall positive impacts on a school's administrative efficiency. School autonomy, possible since 1988 and federally furthered since 1996, has led more municipal than state schools to embark on innovative projects to face specific local problems. Some Bahian municipal schools have made partnerships with NGOs and Foundations and some have elaborated Afro-Centric curriculum guidelines. Some schools have started projects to deal with violence, or to get their facilities improved. The principal of an autonomous school explained:

Before we were autonomous, if the teacher of physical education needed a new ball, he had to write a letter to me, and I had to make a request to the state government. It took several weeks to get the new ball, and in the meantime, no soccer games could be

¹³ In 2002, this minimum amount was R\$ \$415 per year for each enrolled student in municipal and state public schools.

played. The teachers were so frustrated with these delays that they didn't even bother to make the request. Now, as we have autonomy, the teacher comes straight to me and I get him a new ball in a matter of days.¹⁴

One of the cornerstones of the 2000 to 2002 Bahian educational reform was the "regularization of flux." Bahian educational reform became a necessity because the state lacked far behind others in terms of educational coverage, adult illiteracy rates, average years of education, and quality of education, translating into very high rates of repetition and dropout. In 2000, repetition rates in Bahian public elementary schools still were 67.7 percent, compared to a national average of 43.7 percent. 1999 statistics indicate that the students in Bahian public schools repeated on average three times before they graduate from 8th grade, compared to one time nation wide. In 1997 only 62 percent of students in Bahian public schools were promoted every year (VILLELA, 1997).

High repetition rates made Bahian basic public education extremely costly, because students kept clocking the system, their retention causing a shortage of available space for new matriculates, which was even worsened by the fact that most repetitions occurred in first and second grades. New schools would have to be built in order to offer education for incoming students in a time when overall fertility rates are declining. One central element of the Bahian educational reform therefore focuses very strongly on the regulation of student-flux. So called "accelerated classes" have been created, where two years of curriculum content is taught in one year. But observing these classes and interviewing the teachers who carried them out, pointed to some severe shortcomings of this effort. In many instances, it became clear that it was a utopian project to teach in one year what is normally taught in two. Although the Bahian state government is selecting motivated teachers to offer these classes and training and monitoring them during the school year, most interviewed teachers declared that they feel unprepared to do the job. In addition, several teachers pointed me to the fact that they were pressured to promote students, even if they had not achieved the required skills. This pressure seemed to originate from the state government and was passed on to principals and teachers, as previously established promotion benchmarks had to be reached. The pressure to promote even unqualified students and "liberate" the system for the new matriculates provides an example of the influence of intermediary groups like the World Bank, as the state government came under pressure to achieve the goals established in the project outlines negotiated with the World Bank. Pressure was passed on from the World Bank to the state administration, to principals, and ultimately to teachers.

Shortcomings: positional goods, scarcity, and the public-private divide

Although Bahian public schools are gradually improving, structural inequalities remain and curtail the prospects of graduates from public schools to find a job or to start a university education, particularly if compared to graduates from elite-private schools. To

¹⁴ Interview conducted August 25, 2001.

fully understand this phenomenon, one must take the socio-economic conditions of the region and the city of Salvador into consideration. With a 40 percent unemployment rate for people under the age of 24, Salvador has the highest unemployment of all Brazilian cities (DIEESE, 1999). In addition, almost 40 percent of the Salvadorian workforce is active in the informal sector, having no access to any benefits or job security (BRAGA apud AMARAL, 2007). Access to college education is equally restricted and competitive, regulated by a mandatory access test (vestibular) that has traditionally been functional in holding graduates from public schools and applicants unable to afford private prep-courses out of Brazilian colleges and universities (PLANK, 1996). Education is, in the words of economist David Hirsch (1976), a “positional good” that only adds value to its possession if others do not have it – or at least not the same amount. That means that although educational levels for the poor are rising, so are the levels of traditional elites and with them the requirements for finding a job. It is therefore not enough to evaluate the improvement of public education in isolation from its context of rising demands and generally rising educational levels and especially those of traditional elites.

Analyzed historically, it becomes evident that as public education became more accessible to the historically marginalized, it also dropped in quality, therefore perpetuating the exclusion of the historically excluded and consolidating the privilege of the historically privileged. The maintenance of “white” privilege was shifted away from formerly exclusive and elitist public schools to private schools in the same pace as public schools opened their doors to the excluded. During this shift, private elite schools became “white spaces” for the reproduction of privilege and public schools “black spaces” for the reproduction of exclusion.

Statements about the “decay of public schooling since the 1950s” were frequent during our research. An ex-municipal secretary of education explained:

There is a lot of talk about how good public education was. I, for example, studied in a public school all the way to 8th grade. Public schooling was great, but it only served 30 percent of the age group it should, so it was a public school for the elite and it was great for the elite who were in it, but it did not serve everyone.¹⁵

Indeed, until the 1950s, the Bahian public educational system was offering satisfying quality education to only 40 percent of the population in school age (ABREU apud RODRIGUES, 2001, p. 19). As this privilege became more accessible to the broader population, the educational quality dropped so significantly, that once nearly universal coverage was achieved (in the late 1990s) it had become meaningless as a means for social mobility.

Although the education reform under-way is raising the educational levels of historically marginalized groups, most interviewed high school student from public schools thought that they will face difficulties when competing with graduates from private elites schools for highly competitive university entries without significant

¹⁵ Interview with the ex-secretary of municipal education, carried out on June 9, 2001.

additional prep work (which, needless to say, most cannot afford). They were also acutely aware that their chances to compete successfully for desirable jobs were extremely slim. One student's statement was typical and represented the general outlook of most public high school students we interviewed: "I think it'll be difficult to compete, because of the bad quality of the teaching here."¹⁶

Democratic School Management, Community Involvement, and Democratic Learning

Education and democracy are interdependent. For education reform to effectively address the needs of all the people in the same way, schools must be embedded in democratic institutions and processes. The only way to achieve this goal is through allowing parents and communities to shape and influence school policy. In the words of Amy Gutmann (1999, p.14):

a democratic theory of education recognizes the importance of empowering citizens to make educational policy and also of constraining their choices among policies in accordance with those principles – of non-repression and nondiscrimination – that preserve the intellectual and social foundations of democratic deliberations.

Social theorists working on education and schooling from John Dewey to Amy Gutmann have stressed the interdependency of democratization and education. Democracies rely on schools to reproduce the core values of democratic citizenship. Democracy cannot be taught in authoritarian ways, which is why schools have to be democratic in order to achieve this goal. The second aspect implied in this relationship is that school governance has to be democratic not only for students to learn democracy by practicing it, but also to guarantee that disadvantaged groups get their fair share of resources and high-quality training. Fantini, Gittell, and Magat (1970) have pointed out the rationale behind this reasoning when describing community schools. Community schools should "[serve] the community as a center for a variety of educational, cultural, recreational, and local social-development activity, for youngsters and adults. Ideally, such a school also uses the community as a laboratory for learning and organizes the curriculum around the processes and problems of living." The purpose of a community school is to be a place to "practice and promote democracy in all human relationships by encouraging citizens, parents, teachers, pupils, and administrators to work together in the formulation of policy." Community schools should also "remain open day and night and provide a center to which adults can come for advice and training." These authors use the term "community control" referring to the accountability schools should have to the community in general and to parents in particular.

In all the public schools of our sample community and parental involvement through direct participation or through councils had not translated into practice. The school

¹⁶ Student at a State school, 5th to 11th grade, July 8, 2005.

council meetings we were able to visit all followed a similar pattern. Parents of very low educational levels (on average around 4 years for Bahian adults and probably even less in the underprivileged neighborhoods of my sample) almost never influenced decision-making during most of the time. Principals and teachers exercised very strong authority and used elaborated language codes, which clearly distanced them from the parents. The use of technical school language further widened this gap, as most parents seemed unable to follow. Decision-making always followed the recommendation of the principals and parents acted not as active deliberators, but had secondary extra roles. In some schools, the principals selected parents whom they judged most suited for participation.

If analyzed historically, parent participation in public schools did not result from parental pressure for more involvement, but was introduced as a “new requirement” of the education reform. In general, parents disposed of not enough time and information to be able to participate effectively in school management. Where neighborhood associations were present and active, public schools offered no institutionalized ways to allow for their participation. Such participation, although desired by law, is effectively not encouraged by state and municipal administrations. This became evident because there were no institutionalized ways that would enable such participation. Although in some cases neighborhood associations were present and active, it was not clear to both principals and neighborhood association leaders how such cooperation should work in practice.

Instead of an integration of schools with the surrounding neighborhoods, we found principals and teachers of most public schools of our sample engaged in constant efforts to distance themselves from the school neighborhoods and the families of the students. Such distancing was part of a broader strategy that projected guilt for school failure onto students and their parents. Poor, Afro-Brazilian students were typically blamed because they “don’t want anything” from school, which meant that they were not motivated and engaged in schooling. Further questioning about this “not wanting anything” added a socio-economic dimension to this blame. One visit to an urban state school was especially enlightening. The school, just like most other public schools we visited, was in very bad physical conditions, dirty and run-down, and extremely gated, resembling a prison. Walls were sprayed in several classrooms, and several chairs were broken. Water had penetrated and was creating puddles inside some classrooms. The school was without a library. While walking through the hallways, it became obvious that a lot of classes were not being taught and teachers were absent. Every second classroom seemed without a teacher and students were running around in the hallways, making noise and interrupting classes were they were happening. Every window had iron gates, and the general entrance of the school was guarded, so that no one could enter or leave without permission. Students had revolted against the prison-like environment tearing down some of the iron bars and fences.

After showing us around, the principal explained that the main problem of the school was the poverty of the neighborhood in which it was located. Her speech was revealing: “This is a very poor and dangerous neighborhood. [...] People are

always breaking in to steal equipment and play soccer on our playground. [...] Last month someone broke in and took a bath in our water reservoir.”¹⁷

Inquiring how the school interacted with the neighborhood, the principal explained that they were building higher walls. This school, paralleling most other public schools of the sample, sought no interaction with the neighborhood and demonstrated no comprehension of local issues or concerns. It is worth noting that this urban neighborhood had no leisure or cultural facilities at all, no playgrounds and no parks. The only facilities belonged to the school and were fenced off.

Further more, the principal’s speech and attitude clearly located the causes for school failure with the students and the surrounding community. Although race was never mentioned, it also became evident that “bad socio-economic background” was in fact a racialized concept, as all students and residents of the neighborhood were black. The principal engaged in strong symbolical distancing from this reality. Asking her if she lived in the neighborhood, she vehemently asserted that she lived “in a good neighborhood” far way from this one. Her dress code and hairstyle further contributed to this symbolic distancing. Her new car was parked within the school ground like a reminder of her superior social position.

Instead of approximating schools with parents and communities, the school administration of most public schools we visited made every effort to distance themselves from the “bad neighborhoods” that surrounded them. Doing so, a false distinction was created and sustained between “bad” neighborhoods” and “good” schools that needed to be protected against those neighborhoods. Fencing and higher investment in security were the common attitudes towards parents and communities. Students, who lived in these neighborhoods, were thereby transformed into suspicious and potentially dangerous individuals.

The evidence nevertheless supported another interpretation of causes for failure. Against the prevalent accusations, parents and students seemed highly motivated to learn. The high repetition rates alone indicated high motivations to learn and go to school, as it takes high motivation to insist on coming back to schools that consistently fail to teach and promote students. One educator and ex-municipal secretary of education explained this phenomenon:

The parents search the school a lot; I see this often in the countryside. Parents identify school as strategic for their children. It’s strategic, they can’t afford to not attend school, and this is so obvious because of the high rates children enter and leave school. If you have a kid that repeats first grade eight times, it’s because it is very important to him or her. No one repeats anything for eight times without thinking that it is very important. [...] Parents put a lot of responsibility on schools, to the point where they go to schools and ask: “What do you think I should do with my kid? My son is taking drugs, what should I do with him?” The school is an important reference for parents.¹⁸

¹⁷ Interview conducted in September 2001.

¹⁸ Interview conducted September 6, 2001.

This motivation and expectancy of parents and students was not adequately addressed by any of the public schools we researched. Instead, the prevailing poverty of students, and parents was used as an excuse for failing schools. Parents saw schools as points of departure to a better life for their children, but most public schools distanced themselves from parents and their concerns and hopes. In such a way student expectations were not met and dreams were systematically frustrated. This frustration found very strong and clear expression and voice. We interpreted the very common spraying of walls, the destruction of chairs, and the damaging of iron fences as loud cries for help and attention. But most schools chose to ignore these voices.

The creation of distance from students, parents, and communities that we found so consistent in most Bahian public schools translated into a strategy of blaming students and their parents for school failure. This strategy had influenced Bahian school policies significantly. It provided the central rationale for not changing the educational system, but to rather increment it with special skill-training programs, aimed at improving the cognitive skills of supposedly "problematic" students with "difficult backgrounds." As a result, Bahia became the first state in the world to adopt a program developed to address the special needs of children with learning disabilities, the so called "Instrumental Enrichment"-Program, developed by Israeli psychologist Reuven Feuerstein, on a state-wide basis.¹⁹ Bahian educational policy makers thought it adequate to address school failure by focusing on a program that was developed to raise the cognitive skills of traumatized and handicapped children. This policy indicates that Bahian policy makers agreed with most interviewed teachers and principals that students, their parents and their poor communities were the ones to blame for failing schools. The strong focus on cognition further suggests that public high school students were projected as having cognitive problems, and a project was offered that treated them as if they were handicapped or traumatized. This program, instead of diminishing the distances that separated schools from communities, ultimately contributed to their further separation, as the negative stigmatizing of poor students, their parents, and their communities was strengthened.

Lack of organization and incentives

Several organizational issues had a strong negative impact on learning in all the public schools I visited – from 1st grade to 11th. One factor was that teachers had too much workload and did not receive enough payment, recognition, and

¹⁹ A central part of the Bahian school reform consists of applying this project in state high schools. Feuerstein developed this program in the late 40's through his work with children who were orphaned or separated from their parents as a result of the Holocaust. In Feuerstein's webpage, this approach is described as an "Intervention program, it is based on the belief that intelligence is modifiable and not fixed, and it is designed to enhance the cognitive skills necessary for independent thinking. IE aims to sharpen critical thinking with the concepts, skills, strategies, operations, and attitudes necessary for independent learning; to diagnose and correct deficiencies in thinking skills; and to help individuals "learn how to learn." Through the Bahian educational reform, Feuerstein's approach will be applied by all state high schools, making Bahia the only place in the world where this has ever been done on such a large scale. In practice, this project consists of training high school teachers to apply special test-like drills that aim at improving the students' cognitive abilities. Two hours per week were dedicated to this class, requiring two teachers in each classroom – if there are more than 25 students (which is normally the case). In a PEI training session for teachers that we attended, the trainer emphasized that "a lot of money" is spent to train each teacher to be able to apply the technique. International consultants are brought in as specialists helping to execute and evaluate this project.

institutional support from their school, their administration, and not even from the society as a whole. One teacher explained: "I teach 30 courses every week and I am responsible for 15 different classes and the quality of my teaching gets compromised."²⁰ Being a teacher in a public school to most teachers is non-choice, a last-resort job and hence a default option in case nothing else works. Salaries remain low (under 1000 Reais per month – less than 400 dollars) and teachers and principals seem to get worn out systematically by a system that does not valorize or even recognize their effort and does not provide for special compensation or even structural support. Teachers and principals in Bahian public schools are left on their own, with sub-standard salaries, many times working in distant and sometimes dangerous neighborhoods, in a system that does not recognize or compensate any of their efforts – even less any additional efforts. Most public schools we visited were in desperate need of social workers and psychologists to assist teachers and staff with oftentimes cruel, frustrating, and corrosive situations (e.g. drug use, child pregnancy, illiteracy among parents, gun possession and related violence inside school walls), but the only schools that could count on such support were private elite schools that hardly needed them.

Faced with such precarious conditions, teachers and principals need extraordinary motivation to keep committed to such difficult tasks, but the Bahian school systems, both at the municipal and the state level, hardly provide for any incentives to keep teachers and principals committed and motivated. In fact, the opposite is the case. Both systems are designed so that teachers receive no compensations for performing well and no sanctions if they perform badly. Almost no mechanisms of teacher-performance evaluations exist and teachers are hired on a life-long basis, as civil servants. This lack of incentives adds up with the fact that for many being a teacher is not their first choice, producing a situation of under-performance and under-commitment. During all our visits, we were consistently confronted with empty classrooms, absent teachers, and a general atmosphere of abandonment and lack of commitment. We encountered many students standing around in hallways during class time and when asked if they had no class, most statements resembled the ones reproduced here:²¹

Student A: Man, there are almost no classes for anyone. Many teachers just don't show up. This is bad.

BR: Do you think this school helps you achieve your goals?

Student A: Nope.

BR: What is your plan for the future?

Student A: To achieve something good, but this school is not helping me. There are no classes.

BR: Do you think this school prepares you for the vestibular (university entrance test)?

Student A: Man – I don't think so.

BR: And for the job market?

Student A: (laughing) also not.

BR: So the main problem is that teachers do not show up?

20 Interview conducted on July 8, 2005 at a State High School.

21 Interviews conducted on July 8, 2005 at the entrance of a State High School.

Student A: Exactly.

BR: How many times do they miss – give me an example.

Student A: Five or six times.

BR: Every week?

Student A: Yes.

BR: So today is Friday. This week, how many classes did not happen?

Student B: This week we didn't have class at all.

Student C: I only had one class today, Portuguese.

Student A: I only had class today – five classes.

BR: Is this how it is always?

Student A: Yes. That's how it is normally. We have one or two classes per day, almost never all the classes we were supposed to have.

A study carried out in 1997 for the World Bank and UNICEF (VILLELA, 1997) found that on average, Brazilian students in grades 1 to 8 effectively spend only 2.5 hours in the classroom per day. Our participant observations confirmed this finding. Consistently teachers used every possible occasion not to teach – holidays, thematic days, days of the secretary, days of the teacher, the student – besides the occasional private obligations justifying absence. Even if teachers were present, it became clear that to a significant degree they did not effectively teach, but spent their time assigning works to the class while engaging in other activities. But even if they effectively taught, we found that many teachers directed their teaching to only one part of the class – the group they had previously judged as “deserving.” More often than not, the process of grouping students into “deserving” and “undeserving” relied on un-reflected and un-admitted racist stereotyping, particularly aimed at young black males.

Another organizational issue that weighted heavily on the quality of teaching and learning in most public schools we observed was the relationship between principals and their students and staff. The importance of this relationship was brought to our attention by a teacher who stated in an interview that the principal of this school (referring to a 5 to 11 state school) “was afraid of the students.”²² This school was one of the worst performing of our sample, and a general sense of alienation seemed to impinge on the whole school. The principal of this school was a white woman that used different symbols to affirm her middle-class background, whereas most students were poor and black. Her symbolic distancing from the realities of the students and the neighborhood was enforced materially by gates and security systems that made her inaccessible to students.

Symbolic distancing and avoiding race

This symbolic distancing had a clear racial dimension, but was never addressed openly in any of the state schools we visited. In the remainder of this article, I will address this somewhat complex interplay between school management, neighborhood participation, avoidance of race, and symbolic distancing of principals and teachers from students.

²² Interview conducted on July 8, 2005.

Most interviewed teachers, principals, and educational policy makers were unanimous in blaming the socio-economic conditions of students for their bad performance and ultimate failure. Blaming the victims included both students and parents. On one side, poor, Afro-Brazilian students were blamed because they “don’t want anything” from school, which meant that they were not motivated and engaged in schooling. Further questioning about this “not wanting anything” added a socio-economic dimension to this blame.

Notes taken while visiting one state-administered public school illustrate the workings of this strategy:

The principal was clearly disturbed and insecure because of our visit. Her school was in bad physical condition, dirty and run-down, and extremely gated, resembling a prison. Walls were sprayed in several classrooms, and several chairs were broken. Water had penetrated and was creating puddles inside some classrooms. The school was without a library. While walking through the hallways, it became obvious that a lot of classes were not being taught and teachers were absent. Every second classroom seemed without teacher and students were running around in the hallways, making noise and interrupting classes were they were happening. Every window had iron gates, and the general entrance of the school was guarded, so that no one could enter or leave without permission. Students had revolted against the prison-like environment tearing down some of the iron bars and fences. After showing us around, the principal explained that the main problem of the school was the poverty of the neighborhood in which it is located. This is a very poor and dangerous neighborhood [...] People are always breaking in to steal equipment and play soccer on our playground [...] Last month someone broke in and took a bath in our water reservoir.²³

The principal’s speech and attitude clearly located the causes for bad physical conditions and failure with the students and their neighborhood. Although race was never mentioned, it became clear that “bad socio-economic background” was in fact a racialized concept, as all students and residents of the neighborhood were black. This became even more evident, as the principal constantly engaged in strong symbolical distancing from this reality. Asking her if she lived in the neighborhood, she vehemently asserted that she lived “in a good neighborhood” far way from this one. Her dress code and hairstyle further contributed to this symbolic distancing. Her new car was parked within the school ground, serving as a reminder of her superior social position and stressing her social distance to the students and their neighborhood.

But analyzed from another angle, other explanations provoking school failure seem more plausible. One interviewee, herself an educator and ex-municipal secretary of education offered a different rationale:

Parents search the school a lot; I see this often in the countryside. Parents identify school as strategic for their children. It’s strategic, they can’t afford

²³ Interview conducted in September 2001.

to not attend school, and this is so obvious because of the high rates children enter and leave school. If you have a kid that repeats first grade 8 times, it's because this is very important for him. No one repeats anything for 8 times without thinking that it is very important... Parents put a lot of responsibility on schools, to the point where they go to schools and ask: "What do you think I should do with my kid? My son is taking drugs, what should I do with him?" The school is an important reference for parents.²⁴

Seen from this angle, it rather appeared that the high expectancies and motivations of parents and children were frustrated by most public schools we researched. Poverty was used as an excuse for failing schools. Instead of unmotivated students and disinterested parents, one principal pointed at teachers as the ones lacking motivation. In an interview, she explained that a lot of teachers did not carry out the activities that they had planned for the year and written down in the PDE document.²⁵

There are teachers that deny carrying out the actions of the PDE, saying that they are not paid to do it. Other just don't carry them out.

The prevalence of blaming the socio-economic situation of students for their failure in schools had two additional dimensions. First it contributed to the symbolic distancing from their students in which most teachers engaged, widening the symbolic gap that separated them from their students, their parents, and the communities in which schools were embedded. Most teachers explained to me that their students were performing so weakly, because "they are poor," or because "they have problems at home." In such a way locating guilt, most teachers went on to distance themselves symbolically from their students. Most teachers used dress codes, hairstyles and other artifacts associated with middle class consumer patterns to define themselves as belonging to the middle classes, but depicting their students as being poor. "Having a car" and "employing a domestic maid" most frequently served as signifiers for such a symbolic distancing and were constantly played out to students and to me. Although I was not able to carry out a survey of racial self declarations, it became clear during my visits that most teachers tried hard to define themselves as "being white" and classified their students as "being black" although for me the "race" of students and teachers seemed to converge.

Secondly, blaming-the-victims negatively impacted policy-making. Because students and not schools and/or teachers were blamed for school failure, most solutions focused on students instead teachers and the conditions that enable them to perform well. A central part of the Bahian school reform consisted of applying the so-called "PEI-Project" in state high schools.²⁶ Through the Bahian educational reform, the PEI-Project was being applied

²⁴ Interview conducted September 6, 2001.

²⁵ PDE is a document elaborated by the principal together with teachers that sets the aims to be achieved during the following school year. It is planning and evaluation instrument that is part of the 1996 school reform.

²⁶ PEI stands for "Instrumental Enrichment" and is based on the work of Israeli psychologist Reuven Feuerstein who developed his theory in the late 40s through his work with children who were orphaned or separated from their parents as a result of the Holocaust. In Feuerstein's webpage, this approach is described as an "Intervention program, it is based on the belief that intelligence is modifiable and not fixed, and it is designed to enhance the cognitive skills necessary for independent thinking. IE aims to sharpen critical thinking with the concepts, skills, strategies, operations, and attitudes necessary for independent learning; to diagnose and correct deficiencies in thinking skills; and to help individuals "learn how to learn."

by all state high schools, making Bahia the only place in the world where this has ever been done on such a large scale. In practice, this project consisted of training high school teachers to apply special test-like drills that aim at improving the students' cognitive abilities. Two hours per week were dedicated to this class, requiring two teachers in each classroom – for classes with more than 25 students (which was normally the case). Bahian educational policy makers thought it adequate to address school failure by focusing on a program that was developed to raise the cognitive skills of traumatized and handicapped children. Bahian policy-makers therefore projected the “problem” of public high school education on the student body. In such a way, by blaming the students and more specifically, their lack of cognitive skills, supposedly caused by their poverty and “poor cultural background” – a highly racialized stereotype – responsibilities for failure were shifted away from teachers, principals, and most importantly the state-led school administration.

In ultimate analysis, applying the PEI-Project contributed to the fact that the mechanisms responsible for reproducing exclusion in Bahian public schools were left unaddressed. By channeling scarce funds to the very costly PEI-Project, the marginal position of public education overall was left untouched. Even worse, locating educational problems with students instead of schools and school systems further nurtured a vicious cycle that projected low-achievement onto student bodies, thereby hampering their prospects of having positive learning experiences that could raise their academic achievements. Most teachers, principals, and administrators expected little to nothing from the children in Bahian public schools and their failure became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Brazilian state only officially recognized that it had a “race problem” after participating in the Anti Racism Conference in Durban in 2001. The dominant doctrine until then was that Brazil only had a “class problem” and that in Brazil everybody is equal, making Brazil a “racial democracy.”²⁷ As André (2001) has pointed out, race is a topic typically. Explicitly addressing race is typically judged “racist,” as importing racial stereotypes from abroad – typically from the US. By not recognizing and thereby allowing for difference, Brazilian mainstream society applies an ideal role model of whiteness to all its citizens. Unconscious differentiation never the less is a very common practice of Brazilian schoolteachers, who tend to classify students into winners and losers, favoring the already favorites and neglecting the disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The Bahian Education Reform that was initiated by the state government in 1999 and funded to a great extent by the World Bank, has achieved some very significant goals, most importantly the expansion of high school education and the broadening of access to primary education in areas where access was far from universal. A special program component, designed to combat high repetition and dropout rates was also very successful, regularizing the flux of students within the public school system. When examined closer, this reform nevertheless reveals

²⁷ Many authors have written about Brazil's racial regime, e.g. Hanchard (1994, 1999); Winant (2001), and Hamilton (2001).

some important shortcomings and problems, especially with regard to the situation of Afro-Brazilians. Even though the Brazilian and Bahian state now allocate more resources to primary and secondary education than ever before, public school graduates remain unable to compete with private elite school graduates for extreme competitive university education and for the extremely scarce opportunities of the Bahian job market. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, but structural racism provides one of the strongest explanations. Structural racism in Bahia lowers teachers' and principals' expectations about the potential for academic achievement of poor Afro-Brazilians and by doing so becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; structural racism widens the gap between students and principals, contributing to a mutual alienation of this two groups, jeopardizing the creation of strategic alliances and synergies inside schools; and it alienates schools from neighborhoods, impeding meaningful community and parental involvement in school management. Finally, the low recognition that public teachers receive from society as a whole, reflected by low salaries, and a general lack of institutional incentive structures that reward outstanding performance and sanction under-average performance have transformed Bahian public education into a desperado system, where the motivations of teachers and student get systematically grinded and their hopes frustrated.

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