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## Lessons from Ceará to deliver a more inclusive, equitable education

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*Ceará, a state in Northeast Brazil, has become top-performing in education in the country thanks to different commitments and reforms to improve literacy among students and staff training. This combination of efforts can lead to improvement even in less favourable socioeconomic conditions, [Yifei Yan](#) (University of Southampton), [Hironobu Sano](#) and [Lilia Sumiya](#) (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil) found.*

Over the past few decades, there has been great progress on enabling universal access to school education. Accordingly, many developing

countries are now accelerating their efforts to improve student learning outcomes. However, political commitments and financial investments have not always translated into learning improvements. Nor is it uncommon to see the quality of education achieved for certain parts of the population at the expense of others. This makes educational inequality all the more glaring, a trend that has **continued and even intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic**.

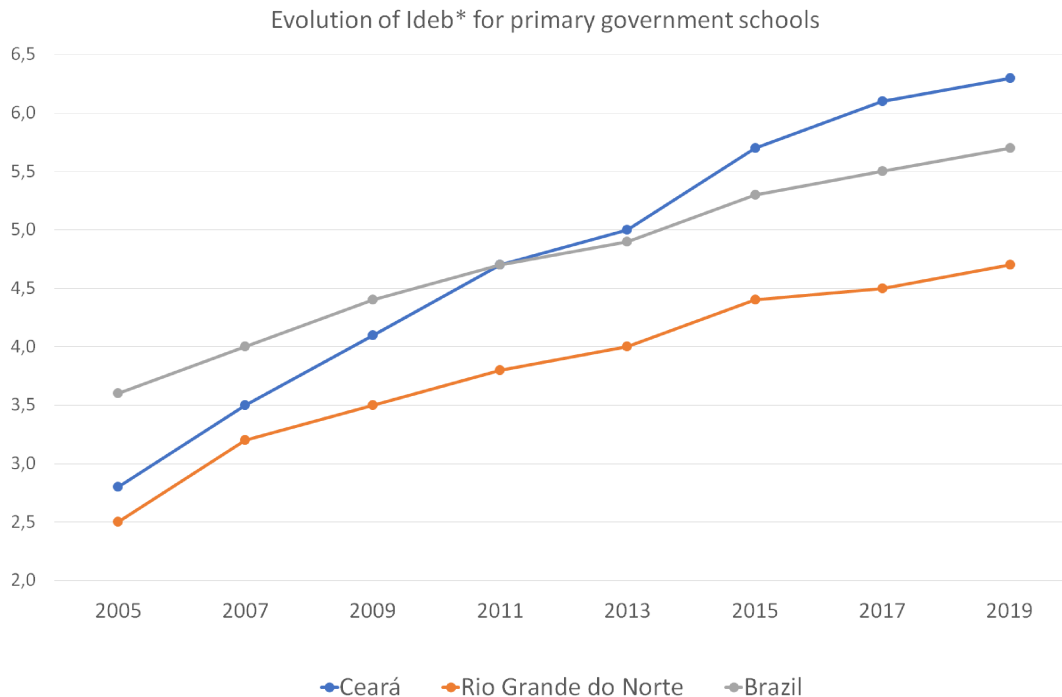
The quest to raise quality and promote equity in education has prompted many developing countries to draw lessons from other education systems – notably, from places like **Singapore** and **Finland**, where high levels of socioeconomic development and plentiful resources underpin their educational excellence. For their Global South counterparts who rarely enjoy the luxury of abundant resources – this message can be rather unhelpful, if not frustrating.

## **Ceará is one of the top-performing states in Brazil**

It is in this context that the story of Ceará, a state in Northeast Brazil, is highly unusual. Located in one of the poorest regions of the country, it is perhaps not surprising that Ceará's student assessment score, progression and dropout rates back in 2005 were much lower than the national average. Yet, in just over a decade, by 2019, Ceará became one of the top-performing states in the country. This improvement was achieved without compromising on equity. In 2017, students from the lowest socioeconomic quintile in Ceará also scored the highest compared with their counterparts from the rest of the country.

Ceará's remarkable educational improvement is even more puzzling when contrasted with the experience of Rio Grande do Norte, its neighbouring state with similarly low levels of socioeconomic

development. Unlike Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte's education sector performance remained lacklustre for the past two decades, thus rendering resource availability as an inadequate explanation for the diverging development trajectories of these two education systems.



Source: <http://ideb.inep.gov.br/resultado/home.seam?cid=321762>  
 \* Basic Education Development Index (Ideb) is a synthetic indicator developed by Brazil's Ministry of Education (MEC) that contains student assessment results, as well as failure, success and dropout rates. Please refer to this official website <http://ideb.inep.gov.br/> for more information.

## Getting policy capacity right was key to its success

**Recent research** by scholars from the University of Southampton and Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, has shed new light on these results from the perspective of **policy capacity**. Broadly understood as “the set of skills and resources – or competencies and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions,” this concept is increasingly used by public policy and administration scholars **to understand policy success and failure**.

For educational governance, more specifically, education systems need to possess the **essential capability of gathering and making sense of a diverse range of information**. There was not much information on the performance of Ceará's public education sector before the early 2000s. In fact, one of the earliest diagnoses on the state of Ceará's municipal primary school performance revealed in 2004 that 39% of Grade 2 students couldn't read or write. Instead of being disheartened by this picture, Ceará's education department embraced this message as a wake-up call on the severity of the learning crisis.

With a team of staff that possess scholarly expertise from multiple disciplines and professional knowledge accumulated through earlier reforms at a municipal level, Ceará's education department has built and consolidated a data infrastructure consisting of diverse and complementary information across student, classroom, municipality and state levels. This has helped the system track its performance and progress while spotting gaps in a timely manner.

Ceará has also exhibited strong operational capacity with appropriate and adaptative use of various policy instruments. For example, decentralisation initiatives were launched by the state to support and coordinate municipal schools, unlike similar initiatives in other states – including Rio Grande do Norte – which tended to cover primarily state-run schools. Yet support, such as teacher training, was directly provided to municipalities with critically low literacy levels only. For the rest, they took a cascading approach by training staff from the municipal secretariats of education first, who would later train teachers within their municipalities.

Underlying these concrete policy interventions was a solid political commitment to treat educational improvement as a state priority. This commitment was brought by state leaders who were former officials from Sobral, a poor-performing municipality that managed to **turn**

**around** its education sector performance through a series of smaller-scale reforms. Beyond political will, Ceará further gained support from other state departments as well as non-state actors.

In stark contrast to that of Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte's reform experience was marked by a lack of both interest and expertise in generating and digesting data that could inform the progress and deficits of the education system. Without this key information, the state tried to tackle the illiteracy issue in adult education, with no substantial interventions at the level of school education. Political turbulence within the state did not help either, as it made the emergence of pro-reform coalitions more difficult. Taken together, variations in different dimensions of policy capacity are found to be the key differentiating factor behind the varying educational outcomes of these two socioeconomically similar states.

## What lessons can we learn from Ceará?

An inspiring example of how a combination of analytical, operational and political capacity has engendered educational improvement despite its socioeconomic conditions, Ceará's education reform is a timely addition to the much-publicised cases of high-performing education systems in the Global North. Alongside attracting **global** attention, education systems in Brazil are trying to follow Ceará's example to bridge education gaps. In 2021, Rio Grande do Norte started to receive materials from the Literacy at the Right Age Program (PAIC) from Ceará, a flagship programme launched in 2007 that comprehensively covered pedagogy development, assessment and educational management.

Before that, the federal government of Brazil similarly attempted to scale this programme nationally. This national equivalent ended in

2018, though, and offers a cautionary note that copying policy interventions from a source site is unlikely to work – even within the same country – without carefully considering their capacity underpinnings. How such capacity can be accumulated should be an urgent question for reformers of education systems in the Global South – even more so as we work to **recover learning losses** and “**build back better**” in a post-pandemic world.

#### Notes:

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- This article was **originally published** in the World Economic Forum.
- Banner image: A group of students listens to a lesson in Ceará, Brazil / **Prefeitura de Belo Horizonte** (CC BY-NC 2.0)

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