

My Visit to Brazilian Schools affected by the Earthquake

Japan Network for the Institutionalization of Schools for Non-Japanese Nationals and Ethnic Minorities

On March 31, I visited two Brazilian schools in Ibaraki Prefecture that were affected by the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake. As one of the school headmasters is the head of the Council of Brazilian Schools in Japan, which organizes over half of Japan's Brazilian schools, I was able to grasp the general situation of Brazilian schools just after the earthquake.

With the enforcement of the 1990 Revised Immigration Law to cope with serious shortages in the labor force in the '80s, an increasing number of Japanese Brazilians have come to Japan. The official records show that they numbered approximately 310,000 in 2008. In the early stages, Brazilian children went to Japanese public schools (primary and junior high), which provide a free education. However, these schools did not have a structure in place to teach the Japanese language, or a policy to pay respect to the original culture and language of these children. Thus, Brazilian children found it very difficult to keep up with all the lessons that were taught in Japanese. They also faced pressure to assimilate, and bullying from other children. At the same time, a need emerged to give them an education in Portuguese, for when they returned to Brazil or to maintain communication among family members. To satisfy this emerging need, parents, school faculty members and some temporary help agencies started to set up, on their own initiative, Brazilian schools that teach in Portuguese in different parts of Japan. In some ten years, the number of these schools came to exceed 100 (as of summer 2008).

Meanwhile, the Japanese government does not recognize educational institutes that do not teach in Japanese as regular schools, and Brazilian schools are not entitled to any support from the central government, which Japanese private schools are entitled to. This has led to very difficult financial conditions for Brazilian schools. The financial crisis in summer 2008 also had a direct negative impact on Brazilian schools. Most parents of these school children were working under unstable conditions as temporary workers or sub-contractors, and more than half lost their jobs. As a result, they could not afford to pay their children's tuition, such that every Brazilian school lost half of their students. Ultimately, more than 20 schools were forced to close. Some of the children went home or were transferred to Japanese schools, and quite a few ended up not going to school at all.

The great earthquake hit eastern Japan as its economy was slowly beginning to improve, two and a half years after the financial crisis. According to Maria Shizuko Yoshida, head of the Council of Brazilian Schools in Japan, as there were no schools in the most heavily damaged area (Tohoku), Brazilian schools did not sustain much structural damage. Still, three Brazilian schools were shut down within two weeks after the earthquake. Most parents of the students work at factories producing automobile parts, electronic components or food. After the earthquake, many factories stopped operations temporarily or reduced production, thus affecting the earnings of these parents, who usually work on an hourly wage basis. Also, with

scarce information being provided in Portuguese by the government regarding the aftershocks and the nuclear power plant explosions, some people panicked and temporarily returned to Brazil. For these reasons, many children left the Brazilian schools, one after another. At one school in Gunma, 40 out of 130 students left the school in the two weeks after the earthquake.

In Ibaraki Prefecture, where 22 people were killed by the disaster (as of April 7), one Brazilian school was closed. There were altogether four schools there at the time of the earthquake. The closed school used to have 40 students, of whom most transferred to other Brazilian schools and some to Japanese public schools, and the rest have stopped going to school altogether.

Many Brazilian schools need a pickup bus for their students. Since the earthquake, many schools are having difficulties in continuing this service because of the petrol shortage, as well as price hike. According to Yoshida, who is also the schoolmaster of Instituto Educare in Tsukuba City of Ibaraki Prefecture, students at her school pay 45,000 yen in monthly tuition plus an additional fee for the pickup service. At the time of 2008 world crisis, the school cut the bus service cost by half so children would not leave the school due to financial difficulty. This time, she also understands the difficult financial situation of the parents, with the decrease in their incomes, and has decided to shoulder a heavier share for the bus service. This has made school management more difficult.

On the other hand, students and people working in Brazilian schools have started relief activities for the earthquake-stricken areas. They are very sympathetic towards those more severely affected by the disaster, although they are also anxious about their own lives.

When I visited the Escola e Creche Grupo Opção in Joso City of Ibaraki Prefecture, students gathered in the entrance lobby during their break to fold a thousand paper cranes to send to the affected areas to encourage survivors in shelters. A thirteen-year-old boy who had called on his classmates to do something for the people affected by the disaster the day after said, “I also felt anxiety and fear about the aftershocks and radioactivity caused by the Fukushima atomic power plants, but stopped myself from panicking, and I decided to do something for the earthquake victims in the evacuation centers.” The students discussed the matter and decided to fold paper cranes and collect blankets and food from their parents to send to the stricken area. The school also extended its full support, and Brazilian people from the local community brought these relief supplies to Sendai City by truck.

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