

6 Brazil (Maranhão): Early learning in Maranhão

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Type of intervention: governmental/public-private partnership

Website: <https://www.educacao.ma.gov.br>

General description

The Brazilian State of Maranhão ranks tenth in the country by population size and is home to more than 1.8 million public school students. The decentralisation of the country's educational system is reflected by the fact that 90% of Maranhão schools are under municipal jurisdiction, including the 7 484 early childhood education centres that serve 283 108 children (INEP, 2018).

In accordance with public health guidelines to limit the spread of COVID-19, the State Secretariat of Education suspended in-person school activities on 17 March 2020, and mobilised teachers' unions and local participatory councils in the development of alternative solutions to provide educational continuity for all students, whether they attend municipal or state-managed schools.

The secretariat's response began promptly two weeks after the initial decree mandating school closures, and involved distributing educational content through state-owned radio and 40 regional subsidiaries. The state legislature provided the secretariat with access to its TV studios, equipment to record digital lessons and podcasts, and airtime on its channel. By mid-April, educational content for elementary and high school students was broadcast twice a day over three open-access television channels and once a day on public radio. The programming gradually came to incorporate content for students aged 0-6. The development and distribution of resources for early learning are the focus of this note.

On 28 April 2020, the National Education Council ratified guidelines that emphasised the specific challenges involved in devising remote learning methods appropriate for early childhood education. Its recommendation to prioritise interaction-based activities in the home represented a new challenge for state authorities: namely, how to best assist parents and guardians in caring for young children and enriching their day-to-day environments. This would entail revising the strategy for digital content production, to make caregivers the primary target audience, rather than the children alone.

These new requirements prompted the secretariat to build on an existing partnership with Laboratório de Educação, a non-profit organisation that aims to sensitise adults about their important role in the learning process of the children with whom they live. Based on insights from qualitative research conducted in five rural Maranhão municipalities in 2019, Laboratório de Educação had developed a family engagement curriculum that offered concrete suggestions on ways for parents and caregivers to encourage child learning by interacting with them during daily routines and household tasks. These ready-made educational resources enabled the Secretariat of Education to reach over 10 000 people through social media channels within two weeks of the National Education Council's recommendation to make families the direct audience of early childhood educational content (as opposed to young children). Every weekday, the secretariat broadcasts or distributes a three- to five-minute video clip through state-owned television, radio and social media channels.

Main problems addressed

The Maranhão Secretariat of Education faced multiple hurdles with the inclusion of children under six in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the decentralised structure of the Brazilian education system made it difficult to design a rapid and effective strategy that would ensure continued learning opportunities for children of all ages. The 1 094 institutions under the direct supervision of the state government encompass 96% of adolescents enrolled in secondary education, compared to only 3% of students in elementary and middle school (INEP, 2018). Early childhood learning centres, in turn, are run by 217 municipal administrators with varying levels of operational, technical and financial capacity. In this context, the secretariat played a crucial leadership role in mobilising local district leaders and civil society organisations in order to draw upon the experiences of individual municipalities and devise a unified response that incorporated children aged 0-6.

Second, only 61% of Maranhão residents have access to the Internet, whether through computers or mobile phones. As a result, proposed solutions had to centre around tools that could impact children without access to such technology. The secretariat therefore quickly established partnerships with open-access television channels as a means of delivering content to the 93% of Maranhão families that own a television (IBGE, 2020^[1]).

Finally, compliance with National Education Board's guidelines for remote learning in early childhood education required that the secretariat address a multifaceted challenge. In order for educational programming to effectively promote constructive interactions between children and caregivers, materials had to be created with parents as a key target audience. In a state where 55% of adults have not completed elementary school and 16% are unable to read or write, resources needed to feature accessible and applicable knowledge, models and suggestions that not only enrich children's learning environments, but also build the confidence of parents and guardians as they carry out these recommendations (IBGE, 2017^[2]; 2019^[3]).

Mobilising and developing resources

With the aim of fostering co-operation across municipalities, the secretariat's first action was to mobilise state and local education boards, teachers' and municipal administrators' unions, and other civil society actors. Members of these deliberative bodies participated actively in drafting the guidelines and response strategies as early as 19 March.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Maranhão's approval in 2019 of a unified state curriculum for early childhood and elementary education laid the groundwork for the streamlined creation of materials and content that met the needs of all municipalities. To operationalise production, the secretariat activated various governmental resources, such as the state legislature's TV channel and the public radio station Rádio Timbira. The secretariat's internal communications team also co-ordinated the communication about and distribution of educational content through as many state social media channels as possible.

Following the publication of the National Education Board's guidelines for early childhood educational strategies during the pandemic, the secretariat connected with Laboratório de Educação to implement across the state the structured methodology to support parents of young children in transforming everyday situations into learning opportunities.

With funding from Eneva, an energy company with operations in several Maranhão municipalities, Laboratório de Educação adapted its existing family engagement strategies and resources to the secretariat's technical requirements for multimedia content. The state's decision to make Laboratório de Educação solely responsible for content production allowed municipal administrators to focus on ensuring that all local families learn about this content, and to provide alternatives to families who would need other forms of contact.

Fostering effective use and learning

Digital tools and devices have played a role in most governments' educational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while most older students have the skills to engage autonomously with online curricular content, younger children rely heavily on in-person interactions for learning.

The Maranhão Secretariat of Education decided to use technology to enhance, rather than substitute, adult-child interactions in everyday life and promote high-quality learning contexts, especially among low-income families.

The video, photo and audio content created by Laboratório de Educação offers research-based suggestions and models for transforming daily tasks such as cooking and cleaning into opportunities for children to learn about their surroundings, without the need for additional resources. For example, when sorting laundry, parents can ask their children to point out which clothes belong to different family members; describe the size and colour of a given item; or count the number of socks, shirts, pants, etc. An older child may even be able to organise the clothes with a degree of autonomy. These interactions spark children's curiosity and interest, while developing their comprehension of mathematical concepts. The resources thus aim to help adults be proactive and attentive to their child's development, by providing accessible examples of simple, intentional actions that can be easily incorporated into daily routines, rather than creating separate contexts for learning. In sharing these resources with families across Maranhão, the secretariat is simultaneously promoting educational continuity for children and empowering parents in their dual roles as caregivers and informal educators.

In addition to the aforementioned materials, the secretariat also distributed a collection of free digital children's books and read-aloud videos produced by Laboratório de Educação specialists to promote language development among children in families with low educational attainment and few books at home.

Implementation challenges

The main challenge to distributing this content was how to leverage new and pre-existing channels of communication in order to reach as many families as possible. Successful implementation therefore required close collaboration with the Maranhão branch of the National Union of Municipal Education Officers, whose members have roots in local school communities and could mobilise them to make families aware of the resources available on public TV networks and radio stations. These outreach efforts have been particularly relevant as the Secretariat of Education did not have a direct connection with families of young children, given that early learning mainly happens at home or in centres run by municipalities.

For example, educators that participated in Laboratório de Educação's family engagement programme carried out in five municipalities in 2019 receive learning resources from the organisation through automated WhatsApp transmission lists. Those municipalities have requested that principals, co-ordinators and teachers disseminate this content to existing school WhatsApp groups (WhatsApp is one of the most popular messaging apps in areas with limited Internet connectivity. Cell phone plans in Brazil often include unlimited WhatsApp usage, and over 80% of Maranhão residents own a smartphone). They also have involved their social assistance departments to help reach families that benefit from their programmes and might not be part of school communication channels. Going forward, the Maranhão Secretariat of Education will guide other municipalities through the process of obtaining contact information for local families and organising them into WhatsApp groups, following this pilot phase.

Despite these efforts to communicate through school and other channels, it will also be crucial to identify and reach out to families in rural areas that require similar solutions tailored to their extremely vulnerable situation. This is particularly pressing in regions where families' lives could be further disrupted by displacement due to heavy rains and flooding.

Monitoring success

In light of Brazil's decentralised educational system, the fact that Maranhão families with children aged 0-6 now receive daily guidelines on how to promote age-appropriate learning activities at home is already an achievement. State authorities could have responded to the national public health emergency by using technology to reinforce more traditional or mechanical practices that largely eliminate interaction. Instead, the secretariat invested in high-quality content that is not only scalable, but also respects the learning or curricular needs of children this age.

The secretariat has already distributed content to tens of thousands of families through its social media channels, but monitoring the precise reach of TV and radio audiences remains a challenge. In order to ensure that the strategy benefits a larger proportion of families with young children in the state, in early May 2020, the secretariat convened nearly 200 municipal administrators to devise targeted plans for outreach to additional families over the following weeks.

Adaptability to new contexts

The measures adopted by the Maranhão Secretariat of Education can be replicated in other middle-income countries with decentralised decision-making structures, but also with a solid network of civil society individuals and organisations that are willing to work together to leverage existing knowledge for an agile response. In this sense, the tradition of public-private partnerships in the Brazilian educational sector facilitated the creation of a collaborative solution, at no cost to state authorities.

The choice to develop content that can be watched on mobile devices as well as TV and radio also played a role in the initiative's success. By taking responsibility of the production of and ensuring large-scale broadcast and dissemination of the educational content across the state, the secretariat enabled individual municipalities to pursue other intentional strategies to reach the most vulnerable and isolated families.

The communication channels built for the pandemic response could be transformative even after the crisis as a possible mechanism to strengthen school-family relations and give visibility to informal learning experiences and interaction in early childhood education. Given the social and economic conditions in a poor state such as Maranhão, this solution could help empower families to see themselves as educational agents, regardless of their own schooling trajectories. It could also foster a sense of responsibility among teachers and principals for providing support to parents in their role as educators, to strengthen children's learning opportunities.

Box 6.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

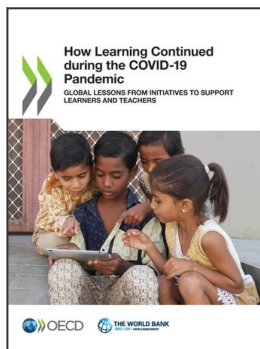
1. Mobilise local stakeholders in defining the problem and sharing responsibilities for different aspects of implementing the solution.
2. Build on existing curricular guidelines to devise age- and context-appropriate responses to the needs of children at all educational levels.
3. Identify internal and external partners in order to fast-track pedagogical and operational dimensions of the educational response.
4. Target parents and caregivers as key interlocutors in early childhood education, and provide ideas and simple routines to help them promote learning at home without the need for additional learning materials.
5. Prioritise channels of communication that reach a large number of families while also exploring specific solutions that target those in particularly isolated regions.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Joao Paulo Mendes de Lima, Superintendent of Planning and Network Collaboration, Maranhão Secretariat of Education.

References

- IBGE (2020), , <https://www.ibge.gov.br/>. [1]
- IBGE (2019), , <https://www.ibge.gov.br/>. [3]
- IBGE (2017), , <https://www.ibge.gov.br/>. [2]



From:

How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Global Lessons from Initiatives to Support Learners and Teachers

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/bbeca162-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Paulet Piedra, Nicole and Fernando Reimers (2022), “Brazil (Maranhão): Early learning in Maranhão”, in Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin, Cristóbal Cobo Romaní and Fernando Reimers (eds.), *How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Lessons from Initiatives to Support Learners and Teachers*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ff81111d-en>

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