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Day of the Child and the Teacher

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

During October Brazil celebrates two holidays in the same week - Day of the Child (Oct 12) and Day of the Teacher (Oct 15). Since during those days I was living with a family containing several teachers and a parcel of grandchildren, I was ideally situated to watch this year's festa. For a week schools in São Paulo did nothing but have parties, organizing games and activities ranging from the obligatory futebol and dancing to a contest in painting the street with colored chalk, as I observed in one school. A local television station mobilized its workers to create a massive parade spanning the city, starring super-heroes such as Superman and the recent arrivals, Rambo, He-man and She-ra. These heroes also made an appearance in the toy stores, along with bicycles, dolls, cars, war games . . . The commercialism reached the point that Dona Dulce, the mother of the house where I was staying, refused to buy presents for her four grandchildren, aged one to four, despite the raised eyebrows of the children's parents. The kids could wait for Christmas, she insisted, since in her opinion the Day of the Child was invented by the stores "as one more means of robbing Brazilians."

She was, however, required by the school in which she teaches to bake a large cake for her class, at her own expense, and she spent several evenings constructing cardboard animals to decorate the school for the occasion. She complained that the money she had helped to raise for a school party, through the sale of cookies donated by her son-in-law, had been used by the principal to fix the broken windows in the school because the principal was too timid to ask the delagacia for repairs. As a result this year's party would have to be limited to cotton candy, homemade from sugar donated by the teachers. She grumbled that this new principal was afraid of everything and unwilling to accept advice, which Dona Dulce, with 30 years experience in the school system, was able to give. And so rather than risk the disorder of activities in which everyone could participate, the principal proposed a program of games in which only a few at a time could play while the others watched. "It isn't right," said Dona Dulce with a click of the tongue. "And how are the other children supposed to feel?"

There are several contradictions built into Brazil's yearly idealization of youth and of education, an idealization which goes back in Brazilian

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history. The sociologist Gilberto Freyre (no relation to Paulo Freire) writes, in The Mansions and the Shanties, that during the patriarchal days of the 18th and 19th centuries the child "was idealized to the point of exaggeration. Identified with the angels. Raised like an angel - going about the house naked like an infant Jesus." But this changed as the child grew older - "between his sixth or seventh and tenth year, he turned into the child-devil."

Vestiges of this contradictory attitude live on, as I gathered from the mix of television productions dedicated to the Day of the Child. In one commercial clip a single child appears holding a candle, alter-boy style, while a clear angelic voice sings out from the T.V. The child mounts the stairs to a symbolic judge's seat, where he and his voice are joined by a multitude of singing, angel-faced children, arms outstretched toward the future. Contrast this image with the popular children's show that follows. A studio appears filled with children dancing and clapping as they watch women prancing around in tiny bikinis, men oggling on the sides, kids mugging and kissing for the camera, complete with confetti, balloons, banners, pop music, hand-waving and foot-stomping. The title of the song? "Calcinhas" - underpants - idealized, waved in the air by crooning, sex-crazed men, accompanied by the shouts of children. In both cases there exists a projection of the child into something she is not. Either the ultra-pure symbol of the future, or the cheering onlooker of sexual exhibitionism, reducing the the mind of the child to "bobagems" (trivialities) while at the same time demanding that she be already adult.

Another contradiction appears when you look at the day in terms of the class differences so evident in Brazil. It is only a small portion of the children in the country who able to buy the toys in the stores, reach the futures promised on television, win the prizes won by the gleeful children dancing to "Calcinhas". The Day of the Child has a different meaning for a child viewing commercial promises from a favela, especially given the fact that most favela children are just as much exposed to television and its promises as are middle and upper class kids. In deference to these facts the television was full of clips discussing the plight of street children, of poor kids forced to work rather than go to school, of the conditions of FEBEM, the delinquent detention center, and logically, of programs to help these kids better themselves. But such clips remain with the taste of paternalism, of upper class guilt and generosity, which little takes it upon itself to examine the social and economic structures leading to the plight of these "coitadinhos" (poor little things).

I received a first hand view of such upper class attitudes when I was invited to a party given by a moderately wealthy family in honor of the Day of the Child. This family, whose own youngest daughter had nearly died of a cerebral hemorrhage the year before, invited a group of twelve orphans to the house to have lunch, play games, receive presents, and go back to the orphanage. The children were shy and watchful, a bit awed by the large, beautifully manicured house (with six bathrooms, as I had been proudly shown a week earlier.) They seemed to enjoy the games, but required a great deal of peppering from the daughters and cousins of the family, one of whom had dressed up as a clown in order to insure a high level of merriment.

After the games I was put on stage. "Here is an American - do you have any questions to ask her about the United States?" Most were reluctant to ask, despite the pumping of one of the daughters, who seemed incredulous that they had no questions since she herself had so many. Finally the questions began to come - "Do you like it there?" "Do you have a family there?" "Do they have poor people?" "Do they have orphanages?" I asked them what dreams they had for the future. The girls - model, singer, actress in commercials. One girl refused to say, smiling self-consciously with lowered eyes, although she indicated that she did have a dream. The boys - futebol players, one scientist, and the oldest, 14 years, with plans to be a stone layer. His was by far the most practical and immediate response, although he turned away his eyes in answering and didn't want to discuss it.

Next came the "surprise" of the day - presents for everyone. The girls received tea sets and plastic jewelry, the boys, chess sets and sports toys. One of the older girls jealously eyed the chess set. One small girl started crying because she didn't like her present. The mother of the family bustled in with apologies and hugs, promising to go the next day to the orphanage to bring her the toy she wanted. Then all the kids got back in the cars and returned to the orphanage.

Afterwards various daughters, cousins, aunts and grandparents sat around in the courtyard discussing the event. "Do you think they liked it?" I was asked anxiously. They tried to account for the shyness and hesitancy of the children - new people, a different lifestyle, a big house "like in the novelas". "But they liked it, right?" - seeking the reassurance of the upper class for its acts of good-hearted paternalism. Since I was pressed to answer, I said it could go both ways. Some would love it, it would open their experience. Others would feel resentment, compare this "good" life with their own and wonder why they didn't get real help, instead of just a day out and then return. The family nodded, talked more about life in an orphanage and the experiences of the day, deepening their understanding of the attitudes of the children. But when the parents returned from dropping the kids off, once again the question - "Did they like it?" "Yes, they loved it" and all were reassured.

A Visit to a School

As I said earlier, October is also the month of the Day of the Teacher. Like children, education has a high value here, or as someone told me a bit cynically, "everyone likes to say he is going to study." And as is the case with children, there are contradictions built into this valuation of education. I have spent the month visiting schools and discussing their situations with students, teachers and administrators. The best way to illustrate the contradictions I have seen is to begin concretely with a description of my visit to one particular school.

I was invited to visit EEPG* Dr. Felicio Laurito by the assistant principal, whom I met in one of the classes I have been attending at the

*EEPG - Escola Estadual de Primeiro Grau (State School of the First Degree). Schools are divided into three levels - Primeiro Grau (grades 1-8), Segundo Grau (3 years, equivalent of high school) and Terceiro Grau (university). Within the city of São Paulo exist two separate and autonomous public school systems, one administered by the state and the other by the municipality.

Pontifical Catholic University (PUC) about "Questions of the Public School". This course is fairly radical in its orientation, taught by Moacir Gadotti, a close friend of Paulo Freire. I was interested to see what the daily practice would be like in a school administrated by people who are at least struggling with the visions and questions raised by Freire's work. Freire has appeared several times in the two classes I have been sitting in on at PUC, having recently returned from a trip to Sweden and Denmark for a series of conferences on education. He changed his previous plans to return to Recife, his city of origin, and will remain in São Paulo as a consultant on educational matters, although after this year he will stop formal teaching. He remains as impassioned as ever about education in the historical process, and it is interesting to watch those listening to him catch that passion and use it to reflect on their own political and educational experiences.

EEPG Dr. Felicio Laurito is a smallish school in the poor to middle class industrial neighborhood of Santo André, one of a cluster of small municipalities outside of São Paulo under the joint name of "Cidade Industrial". Within attending distance is a "favela", a Brazilian slum consisting of makeshift shacks ranging from cardboard to wood and plaster. Ozeneide, the assistant principal who invited me to visit, said that most of the children who come to school from the favela do not make it to the eighth series (equivalent of eighth grade, which marks the end of obligatory schooling according to Brazil's current laws.) Thus even in this public school you see a gradual social scaling. Those who end up graduating from "primeiro grau" (grades 1-8) end up coming mostly from the lower middle class, since favela children have dropped out and middle and upper class kids were from the beginning placed in private schools on the university track.

The school is situated in a traditional thick-walled building, with open courtyards and covered walkways. It is the oldest school in the neighborhood, as Ozeneide told me as she drove me from the train station to the school. Compared to some of the other schools I have seen, this one seemed clean and calm, the latter because many of the older students had gone over to a neighboring school to set up an exhibition for the cultural fair to be held that weekend with the theme, "Brazil: 0 to 2000". The cleanliness, on the other hand, seems to be something the school is fighting for. Ozeneide showed me two classrooms in disastrous disrepair - paint peeling, chunks missing from the floor and wall, windows broken, everything covered with dust. "Until recently we'd been giving classes in rooms like this," she explained, since the school had been unable to get money from the state board of education for repairs. The parents began to complain (or rather, "reclamar", that great Latin American term which falls between "complain" and "clamor" - picture a noisy group of mothers congregating outside of a principal's office, expressing their indignation in a steady, high-pitched stream and demanding that something be done.)

The principal succeeded in organizing this group of parents to put pressure on the state until the school finally received the money it needed for repainting. Now the school is trying to re-awaken parent clamoring in order to finish repairs and clean up the school, but Ozeneide says it has been hard to mobilize these same parents a second time. It's even worse for the bigger schools - more space to keep clean, less "funcionarios" (employees ranging from the principle to the janitor) per space and per student, and so things stay dirty, windows broken by gangs who leave their signatures on the

walls. At least this small school is kept relatively clean, with its newly painted rooms bright and about as attractive as an unadorned square room can get.

I spent most of the morning talking with a group of teenagers in eighth series (the oldest group in the school, with ages ranging from 14 to 18). When I first entered the classroom with Ozeneide the room was hushed, little motion or talk, the blackboard covered with words divided into syllables with letters and accent marks in small boxes. The kids began giving each other alert looks when it was disclosed that I was an American and that I wanted to talk to them. Noticing me eyeing the blackboard, the teacher explained that since most of the kids were gone helping to arrange the exhibition, the class was just doing a review - "always needed with these kids, as they forget." But she was glad to let me take over, something I have noted at other schools as well. Diversion is welcomed by teachers and students alike, and no one seems heavily invested in sticking to a schedule or getting through material. What comes, comes (and as Ozeneide told me later, these are "poor kids", and so many teachers have the attitude that they aren't worth much exertion, since "they won't go anyplace.")

The teacher handed the class over to me, interrupting from time to time to tell me about her relatives in the United States. My strategy in for visiting schools has been to have kids write down on paper the five things which they consider most important in their lives, and start the dialogue from there. The kids willingly began to write, but were shy initially about speaking, seeing as I was in the "teacher's" role and they weren't sure what I was after. Later I found out that in response to my next question, what they would want to change in their lives, an entire group of girls on the left side of the classroom had put timidity, lack of courage. But the class began to warm up as we went around the room and heard all of their responses.

"Studies" was the number one answer as first or second choice, followed closely by "family". This illustrates the high value given education, at least in the official consciousness. The number one answer over all was "friends", usually mentioned later in the list. The problem with the "five things" methodology is that while serving to open up dialogue, it usually leads to pretty official responses, as they are still testing me out to see what I want. Later the question of educational value began to be more contradictory, as I tried to push the issue by asking where they learned more, in school or in the street. The immediate answer, "the street".

Me: "What do you learn on the street?"

A Clamor: "How to smoke, about drugs, sex . . ."

"All the vices" (giggles)

"No, no, no, in the street you learn how to live."

I tried to press for more explicit, but that was all they would give me at that moment. I asked about their perceptions of problems in the world, and their perception of their power to effect changes. The number one problem which they listed was street children. What would they do if they were President of the Republic? Build school, give them homes. Next in their consciousness were the high cost of rent, violence and war, the economy:

"Salaries are too low and prices too high."

"What would you do to change this?"

"Lógico - raise salaries and lower prices." (laughter)

The burden of change was invariably thrown to the government, with a very vague idea of what those changes would entail. Once again I witnessed the almost immediate rejection of the government which seems to be a Brazilian (or at least, a "Paulista") trademark. When I asked who thought the government should be changed, all hands shot up, except for one boy in the back, the kind of alert, independent kid who never arrives at being a good student because there are more interesting things happening in his life. The other kids turned to him, incredulous:

"You like this government?"

"No, it's that a new government might be even worse."
(laughter - point made)

Idealism returned with the objection of a red-haired girl who says she wants to be an artist and, in what is still a rare move for a Brazilian girl, happily identifies herself as a "feminist":

"But when I say change, of course it has to be change for the better."

But they had few answers as to how that change could come about. When I asked about community organization, they looked confused, at a loss. They became interested as I gave the example of the parent clamoring that led to the re-painting of the school, but objected that that kind of community organization is rarely found. I asked why. Once again, a clamor:

"It's that the people are at a very low level. They are lazy, stupid, they don't care, they don't know how to organize."

And does democracy exist in Brazil? It was here that their confusion and ambiguity was strongest. Right now in the media they are receiving many messages about democracy, transition, elections, the constitutional process. They live with the vivid fact that four years ago Brazil was markedly undemocratic, although they told me they could not remember military rule, and thus they could not compare it to today, though they supposed that now things are more "open." But there is a difference between a society which is "open" enough to allow you to think and say what you want, and one in which you feel a genuine participation in the decisions and directions of the country. I asked for a definition - what is democracy? Here they had no problem: "when the people participate in the government". But is Brazil right now a democracy? From a shrugging of the shoulders, an appearance of being once again at a loss, they swung into a shaking of the head, indicating that no, they really didn't think that this was a democracy (but what was democracy really?)

At this point the teacher, who had been watching the discussion, laughing at the jokes but a bit bemused, told me that the class was officially over. I could stay if I liked, but she would leave. This was perfect for me, since I had been wanting to talk about the kids' views of education with more frankness than they would have been willing to show in front of the teacher. I freed the kids to leave if they liked, but no one did, and we continued talking for two hours more.

As I noted earlier, the students express contradictory attitudes toward schooling and education. "I like everything, without exception" wrote one girl, the extreme edge of the generally acritical attitude most expressed at first. But as we talked their criticisms began to emerge, although in an unfocused and scarcely articulated way. I asked them to list the things they liked or didn't like about the school. The kids generally wrote that they liked teachers, friends, "recess", the school in general (which does seem to be an open and friendly place. I have nowhere encountered the near-prison conditions you sometimes find in New York and other North American cities.)

The lists of "don't likes" were scanty: one who didn't like the principal (although I heard high praise from others - "the best we have had"), one who didn't like the geography book, one who wanted longer recess. Several thought classes should be more "fun" and less monotonous, "with less listening and more talking". Despite the references to boredom and disinvolvement, I did not find an articulated resentment or rejection of school. On the contrary, when I asked them to write why they were studying and what was the value of education, the responses were without exception positive - "muitissimo importante" wrote one boy. But you can also note in these responses an orientation toward the distant future, a sort of alienation from the present they are living right now:

"Without studies we won't be anyone in life."

"Education is very important and in the future it can transform me into an important person, so I plan to go on to the end."

"to have a better future"

"to be able to enjoy life more, studies bring us much happiness, and education is something everyone values."

No one said they were studying because they liked to learn, or because it helped them understand their lives now. Education is seen more as something they have to endure now so that later they can "cash in". And thus they answer without hesitation that they learn more on the streets, that yes, it is pleasurable to be a teenager, but that their lives have a double character. We had somehow got around to talking about teenage slang - I was explaining the double entendre of Michael Jackson's hit song, "BAD", in which "bad" means "good", a trick of meaning which the kids here love - when they volunteered that in school they talk and act completely differently than they do in the streets. In school they know how to act good, to talk "right", because the teachers go on correcting, but on the streets their "real" language and "real" personality come out. "It's like a double personality" they told me. And thus the contradiction and tacit criticism hidden in their attitudes toward education is the reverse of Michael Jackson. "Good" means "bad", or the schooling which they praise in reality has little to do with their lives.

And how are their lives? Here I have as yet only a vague surface idea, based on the free-for-all which evolved at the end of my conversation with the kids. I said I would field any questions they had about the United States. Everyone rearranged themselves around the classroom, sitting on top of the desks in eager, lively clusters, a striking transformation from the hushed, orderly and disengaged group I had come upon earlier. The key question soon arose: "Is it like in the films?" - i.e. is it beautiful, clean, rich, or to the contrary, exaggeratedly violent and crime-filled.

They wanted to know what the music is like, how people dance, how they dress, what groups they have (e.g. punks, heavies, darkies, all of which have representatives in Brazil.) The question of AIDS came up, as it has come up repeatedly in my conversations with people, seeing as Brazil now has over 2000 cases. The kids told me that while people worry, they don't worry too much, and it hasn't really affected attitudes toward sex. They seemed to agree that sexual activity among teenagers generally begins around 14 years, with 16 being the age when you start staying with one person.

Most of the girls said they don't want to get married until 24 or 25 (after 27 it is "too late".) They also report a good deal of pressure from drugs. Crack has arrived - one or two kids said they had seen it, although it doesn't seem too common. The kids seemed generally optimistic about their futures, seeming to feel like they have opportunities, although it was hard to tell the depth of that optimism from this short chat. Their concern with independence is focused around having freedom to go out when and with whom they want, and to come home at the hour they want. The girls especially feel over-protected in this respect, complaining of a double standard in which boys have more freedom. One girl defined freedom in this way:

Freedom for me is the right to do what I want. To be able to shout, to let loose, when I feel the urge. To be able to talk, have fun, dance, etc. But we have to share everything and not abuse it.

From this peek at some of the things on the minds of some teenagers in São Paulo, you might surmise that they don't seem too different from middle class teenagers in the United States. I have yet to understand how true this is, and I expect to find differences as I learn more about the culture and their own specific experiences, concerns and desires.

Private vs. Public Schools

Before ending this letter I'd like to discuss the background of education in São Paulo, to give an introduction to the conflicts and debates running in the city and country at this time.

During my first weeks here President Sarney fired his Minister of Education, in the opening move of his resolution to "radically restructure" the political makeup of his cabinet. Jokes were made in my class at PUC about how no one even noticed, since it made so little difference in the daily operations of the schools. Last week Sarney finally appointed a new Minister, a purely political move aimed at securing the help of an opposition party, seeing as the appointee has no experience with education. This will give some indication of the lack of communication between those in the schools and those in the upper level bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, the constitutional assembly is debating the structure education will take in the "New Republic". Potent issues in the debate include the amount of money to be contributed from federal, state and municipal levels, the age of compulsory schooling (currently 6 to 14 years) and the establishment of much fought-for public daycares and pre-schools. But the most divisive issue is whether public money should be used solely for public schools, or whether the state should continue its current policy of giving financial assistance, including scholarships, to private schools. This is a long

debated issue in Brazilian educational politics. The original "public" schools were actually run by the church, and gradually through constitutional changes were transferred to the state under the slogan, "free, compulsory, and laical schooling for all." But privileged families still send their children almost exclusively to private schools.

Educators concerned with the class divisions promoted by the separation of schools for those who can pay and those who can't, waged a fierce fight for the exclusive support of the public schools, opposed by the supporters of "independence and pluralism of educational choice," as the rhetoric goes among supporters of private education. In 1961, as a result of a compromise move by Congress which many viewed as a defeat for public education, a law was passed dividing public money between public and private schools. The military government later wrote this policy into its new constitution (of 1967) and began to pursue an active policy of "privatizing" public schools and universities. While in 1963 only 20% of university education was paid for by the students, today more than 80% is privately controlled, charging high tuitions while receiving support from the government. This takes it out of the reach of most of the population, as well as giving the government a degree of control over the ideological directions of the universities.

The result of privatization in the primary and secondary levels is that São Paulo has not one but three school systems. The first is run by the state (including the school described earlier), the second by the municipality (under the unsteady jurisdiction of mayor Jânio Quadros) and the third consists of the private schools, ranging from elite academies to religious institutions to commercial training programs to "alternative" and experimental projects. And like in the United States, the result of middle class flight from the public schools is an extreme discrepancy between rich and poor in terms of resources, quality of teaching, and hence preparation for higher education. College entrance depends on how well you do on the "vestibular", the state wide exam which measures accumulated knowledge in history, geography, science, math, literature and language. The vestibular is an extremely dramatic affair, as I am learning from sharing an apartment with a woman who is studying for the vestibular for the extremely competitive (but free) University of São Paulo. Every year television augments the drama with stories of the student who overslept the day of the exam and missed his chance at a future, of mothers crying and "reclamando", of suicides and nervous breakdowns. Like SAT prep classes in the United States, small "cursinhos" proliferate for those who can pay to be prepared. Although there are exceptions, in general this is the rule of higher education - without payment, that is to say, without some form of private schooling, you have little chance of mastering the extensive material and tricky structure of the exam, which would give you the right to enter the "public" university.

And even if you do poorly on the vestibular, if you have money you can enter one of the "diploma factories", as my housemate scoffingly calls them. I visited one of these expensive upper class faculties, which tend to be weak in their course offerings, conservative in orientation, and judging by several conversations I had with various groups of students, permeated by a sort of languor, a general "I-don't-know-what-I'm-doing-but-I-need-the-diploma" attitude which is often found among upper class youth. All's more or less well, since they will probably end up with lush jobs in government or business procured by family members. The stronger students of the middle

and upper classes, those with personal motivation and a solid private school background, go to the free public universities, which are much more challenging in their offerings. Hence the contradiction that free higher education, rather than being open to the poorer classes as a way of breaking out of the educational dam, is in reality extremely class exclusive and reinforces the belief of the higher classes that public lower education is inadequate for their needs.

The concrete result of this situation is that most of the kids I spoke to at EEPG Dr. Felicio Laurito have little chance of ever reaching the university. This despite the fact that all but one declared their intention of continuing in school through university, an assertion of purpose which surprised Ozeneide when I discussed it with her later. At another, poorer school I visited, a sizable group declared that they planned to leave school as soon as possible, which right now is 14 years, or at the end of "primeiro grau". The principal of this second school, which is right on the edge of a favela in the poor east district of the city, said that many of the kids come solely for the "merenda", the mid-day snack. Many of the older kids work all day, and having gotten up at 4 or 5 in the morning, come to school in the afternoon or evening tired, disinterested, without the concentration to spend four hours sitting at a desk listening to a teacher talk about verb conjugations or the natural resources of northeast Brazil. They are nourished on television and street culture, with little family support for studying. Add to this teaching methods that are largely static and traditional, an acute lack of resources such as books, classroom materials, and laboratories (almost non-existent in the public schools), and a teaching staff accommodated to the fatalistic cycle described earlier - that poor kids aren't worth exertion because they will only stay poor (and so they do.)

And yet both Ozeneide and the principal of this second school said that in the last year or so there has been an opening, an "abertura", in the possibilities for the public schools, after the long closure of the military period. Methods and structures of courses are being reviewed at high levels, influenced, it would seem, by Paulo Freire's work. An example is a plan to make the teaching of history less "positive" and more "dialectic", marxist language which seems roughly to mean it will work more out of the context of the conflicts of Latin American history, rather than the imported, abstract, step-by-step "History of the West" which has predominated until now. The trouble is that most of these initiatives are coming from the top down, which is the opposite of Freire's intention, but which is the reality of the change process at this stage. The teachers are asked to make changes which they don't understand and can't see the purpose for. For example, I asked Dona Dulce about the use of Freire's methods in the municipal schools. She said that Jânio Quadros had initiated an experiment in having classes which were "just talking" (an extreme over-simplification of Freire) and which neither students, parents or teachers considered to be "real classes". It seemed to her and the other teachers that the essence of the method was that you don't correct the students, but let them go on making mistakes, which to any half-way conscientious teacher appears ridiculous.

In EEPG Dr. Felicio Laurito, Ozeneide has been working together with her principal to stimulate dialogue and reflection among teachers such as these. Working with Freire's ideas, they have been trying to get the

movement of change going in the opposite direction (bottom-up) by having teachers reflect about the problems they encounter and think of ways to mobilize in order to surmount those problems. But as Ozeneide explained, from the teachers' point of view this is just more "bla bla bla."

"The teachers here are very alienated," she told me. "They are coming from 20 years of military government, in which they were simply told what to do. Initiative was suppressed and conditions stayed the same. Even now when things are more open, they have watched their opinions being asked by the secretary of education and then disappear. To them, our ideas about dialogue and education is just more talk coming from above that will change nothing. And when we do get opinions, they are usually at a very trivial level - mostly complaints about the workload and suggestions as to how to exert themselves less."

The teachers I have spoken to give a slightly different version. Because of extremely low teacher salaries, most are forced to work two, possibly three "turns" a day.* A working day might go from 7:00 am to 6:00 or even 10:00 pm, or from 1:00 pm to 11:30 pm. This leaves little time for planning or correcting homework (and thus little homework is given) or simply for living their lives. And for many of them the end of military government means things have gotten worse rather than better. One teacher complained that discipline is much worse now, as the authority of the teacher is declining with the new "freedom" and punishment is not allowed. And rather than wanting more parent participation, one teacher wanted less, since parent clamoring gets in the way of teacher autonomy - for example, the authority to fail a student if he or she does no work. One of the policies of the new educational reform has been to refrain from failing students, a by-product of the progressive movement imported from the U.S., which there as well as here has reinforced the decline in quality in the schools, since kids are simply passed from grade to grade without addressing the weaknesses in the schools which led kids to fail in the first place.

And so I have returned to where I started - the Day of the Teacher and the ironies that day contains. Recently a group of teachers from the municipal schools organized a demonstration in front of Jânio Quadros' office, requesting higher salaries and improved working conditions. Jânio ordered his guards to throw water on them. Now teachers in the state schools are organizing a general work stoppage to take place on November 6, with a huge manifestation planned in front of the offices of the state Secretary of Education. I listened to one rather flat-voiced geography teacher become animated as she mobilized a group of students to go along. The kids caught the spirit, although for them it's more of a "passeo", an outing with the promise of fun and excitement. This day may prove to be a more genuine "Day of the Teacher" than last month's holiday. But whether it succeeds in resolving the multiple difficulties faced by teachers remains to be seen.

* Schools are organized on four hour schedules, with two or three distinct groups of students arriving for morning, afternoon, and evening classes.

My housemate Mirian, on reading this letter, objected with the question, "Don't you have anything good to say about Brazil? Things are bad, it's true, but they are not all bad." She's right. It is spring here, and the flowers are brilliant in reds, pinks, blues and yellows. I am learning how to cook beans and rice Brazilian style, how to un-lose myself in the city bus system, and how to select a ripe mango in the open market. And on the educational front, there are alternatives in motion, struggling with the real obstacles in front of them without falling into fatalism or despair. Next month I will move on to a discussion of the debates, proposals and initiatives among those looking for change in education - and opinions as to whether those changes are "Good" or "BAD".

Um abraço brasileiro,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ann Mirian".

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