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A View from Brazil: Education Reform

Posted by [Rich Harwood](#)

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I spent last week in Brazil, and came away with a feeling of immense possibility for that nation and its people. Part of my trip took me to the rain forest where my colleague, Lisa Flick Wilson, and I visited one of them most innovative schools I have ever seen. And where there are lessons for all of us.

After a 40 minute helicopter ride, our party arrived at the rural family house – Casa Familiar, a technical school for young people in the state of Bahia, in the north of Brazil, and the heart of the Atlantic Rain Forest. About 35 students greeted us.

These students come from the larger region, many of them once destined to destitute poverty, lost hope, and a feeling of being invisible to the rest of Brazilian society. But, one by one, the students told us of how the school had enabled them to feel accomplished and competent, see their value to society, and want to give back to others.

This last point – the desire to give back – was profoundly expressed, all without any notion of required “service learning” hours or programs we might hear about here in the U.S. Instead, this ethos permeated everything at the school and how it operated. Indeed, this school was producing not only good students, but is fast becoming a force for positive change in the larger region. For instance:

- The school created a lab to teach students about soil conservation and other agriculture issues. Now, anyone in the region can come to the lab, use it, and learn. It's a community resource.
- There is a room filled with computers at the school, donated in part by various companies. Beyond students using these computers, anyone in the region can too. Even more, the school realized that many people in the region cannot get to the school, and so the school takes computers into the community for people to learn how to use.
- When they return home every two weeks, the students serve as community teachers, where they share with others the skills, insights and lessons they are learning at the rural family house so others can benefit. (Think about the power of these students, once forgotten, now standing before their community.)

- What's more is that both the soil and computer labs are run by student graduates. In fact, all of the staff graduated from the school – from the principal to the director of education programming.

Here in the States I have been urging many schools to think about their role as more than educators of students in classrooms, but as a larger force for change in their community. Such suggestions often are met by resistance – “We don't have the time” – or by turning the idea into highly complex endeavors riddled by endless plans, detailed strategies, boring Power Point presentations, and laundry lists of activities.

But, in Bahia, they have created an approach driven by elegant simplicity, in which the school produces students who excel and builds community at the same time. One can imagine how the graduating students can form into a network of new, young leaders from throughout the region, who bring a clear commitment to their culture and heritage, and who know how to bring others together to create the kind of communities people there seek to have. This is exactly their plan.

After the students spoke, I was asked to say a few words. Among a number of points, I said that I had heard many Brazilians during my trip express concern about how such a fast-growing, diverse nation could ever come together to produce positive change. Well, as I looked into the eyes of these students, I told them that I could see the future of Brazil, right there, in Bahia, a place no one would ever dream could produce such innovation and leadership. And to me the future looked quite bright.

My second point was that I wanted their permission to tell their story back here in the U.S. To me, this is a story of hope and change – real, not imagined; results driven, not rhetorical; and one developed through discipline, not long lists of disparate activities. It is true and genuine social innovation.

I also told them that I would love to have each of them come back to the States with me to tell their own story. I hope that day, too, will come.