SECONDARY EDUCATION:

Critical Policy Issues

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to identify critical issues for consideration in the development of secondary education policies in Latin America. The method followed consisted of analyzing available literature—particularly Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) studies—extracting from each relevant document (according to IDB and the Academy for Educational Development (AED) experts) issues currently faced by policy makers in the region. Additionally, discussions were held with individuals involved in secondary school reform in different areas of the world as well as with experts of the IDB. The document follows a simple and direct logic. First, grand forces affecting the expansion, structure and curriculum of secondary schools in Latin America are briefly described. Next, dilemmas that countries typically face are posed. Finally, *critical issues*, that is, central policy making problems and aspects that allow international comparisons and country-specific lessons are identified.

Forces affecting Secondary Education

Three great interconnected forces are stimulating the formulation of new answers to old human development problems, such as the formation of the citizens of our nations, the preparation of youth for productive work, and the development of mechanisms for selecting an elite class for arts, sciences and politics. The first force is the irreversible human learning impetus that has accelerated in recent decades, one of whose global manifestations is an increased emphasis on primary schooling. This force is generating pressure from the bottom up, in the direction of more learning for all. The second force is the changing work environment that youths are encountering, which is coming from all sides including the labor market and promotes a different type of education. The third force is the development of science and technology, which is affecting not only what is being learned but also how it is being learned. This third force, which infuses all dimensions of learning through global communication networks, in research centers and institutions of higher education, exerts continuous pressure on secondary education efforts to keep up.

First, enthusiasm for knowledge and education has not only increased throughout history, but has accelerated in recent years. It is widely accepted that knowledge is the most important source of welfare and progress for individuals, organizations, and nations. Several developing countries have thus committed to expand and improve their primary education systems, resulting in an unprecedented increase of primary school students, many of whom expect to continue their formal education. The demand for secondary

education in the developing world will soon be formidable. The vast majority of children born in the year 2000 will have access to primary education and will probably wish to continue to a higher educational level. This pressure is thereby moving the frontiers of primary education to the lower secondary level under the concept of basic education. Nevertheless, the schooling gap between different groups of nations (for example, OECD members and others) does not seem to be closing. While the countries of Latin America engage in secondary school expansion and reform, other countries (with more developed education systems) hope to increase the education of their citizens to higher levels.

The growth of school establishments in Latin America in comparison with other regions of the world such as Southeast Asia or Europe is relatively slow. The commitment made during the Heads of State Summits of 1994 and 1998 by the countries of the Americas to substantially increase access to secondary education and improve its quality has not been supported by facts demonstrating the possibility of achieving those goals. Rather, gross secondary school enrollment in Latin America, currently at 56%, is quite far from the 75% expected for the year 2010.[1] Further, the Summit's goals included not only expansion but also increased quality of education. Though the pressures for increased access to secondary education will be more intense in the less advanced countries of the region, all countries will have to struggle for increased quality and a redefining of its role, structure and curricula.

Secondly, young people are encountering a work environment that is very different from that of the recent past, and is in a process of constant change. As businesses continuously restructure to reduce costs, remain competitive, and develop more flexible employment patterns, networking among companies expands and global commerce accelerates, increasing the need for "managing information and knowledge". In this fluid context the impact on the development model Latin American countries have recently adopted becomes visible in most indicators of youth employment and development. The new model demands higher, autonomous cognitive competencies because of high unemployment and inadequate secondary education.

Because of these inadequacies, it is difficult for young people to plan their careers based on assumptions that were valid for the more stable and predictable work environment of the past. The new generation must develop skills that transfer easily across the labor market and thus allow mobility. In order to survive in this fiercely competitive environment, they must realize that learning cannot end with a certificate of title. For poor youth, it is more difficult still, when employment options are concentrated in the informal labor market and the possibility of acquiring the skills, language and technology required for the new work context is very limited. However, it is precisely at this level of the educational system where school learning can translate into social success, and where pressures for equity and democracy converge.

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[1] Financial resources required achieving proposed goals are estimated in Lawrence Wolf and Claudio de Moura Castro (2000) *Secondary Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: the Challenge of Growth and Reform*. Technical Papers Series. Washington D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank.

Third, the new communication technologies are leading the globalization process, but their impact on human life is just beginning. However, the real revolution will not be the technologies in themselves, but the way we will learn from them and how this learning will affect our life. The pressure on secondary education will be two-fold. Science and technology systems, through higher education efforts, will improve the quality of secondary education graduates. They are the source of the critical mass of future analysts and professionals. More important, no student should put aside the learning of technology for future work, post secondary education or even participation in social life. Another dimension of technology is its potential to affect youth education by offering unprecedented enrichment of learning contexts and opportunities for sharing and connecting across the globe.

The Dilemmas we are facing

Both Ministries of Education and families are involved in the decision-making process of how much and what type of education to provide for our youth. But entrepreneurs and academics also have questions about the products of secondary education and ideas on the guidelines that schools should follow. Debates occur and decisions are made amongst tensions and dilemmas which often emerge when a new education legislation is proposed, an educational reform is launched, an international loan is negotiated, or simply when a rural family has to decide whether to send their daughter to secondary school.

Some of these tensions and dilemmas relate to priority, size, and financing of secondary education, others to its nature and function, and others to its structure and curriculum. These tensions are contextual in nature and differ according to the development of education in each country or locality. In Latin America and the Caribbean the variance of secondary education development indicators is wide and noticeable not only between countries but also within countries.[2] All countries, however, have to redesign their policies according to new expectations, within guidelines illustrated by the following extremes:

- Invest in primary education or expand access to secondary education as a State priority?

- Finance secondary education through the State or privately?

- Maintain a cycle of six years of secondary education, or two cycles of lower and higher secondary schools?

- Mandate general education or specific work training?

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[2] For current situation of secondary education in Latin American and Caribbean countries see: Laurence Wolf and Claudio de Moura Castro (2000) Secondary Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Challenge of Growth and Reform. Inter-American Development Bank. Sustainable Development Department, Education Unit. Washington D.C.

- Advocate a common school, separate vocational schools, or a mixed market?

- Design a uniform curriculum or a diversified curriculum?

- Emphasize integration and social equity, or response to individual needs?

Herein are the issues that comprise the main architectural units of the educational system. These issues have been addressed differently in all regions of the world and have thus generated a variety of options for secondary schools with diverse external relations and internal structures. The panorama we have today offers "ex post facto" comparisons and useful lessons in a time of rapid changes and great uncertainty.

There is also a closer source of knowledge on the subject: the long history of trials and reforms of secondary schools in Latin America and the Caribbean. This history provides important lessons to the new reformers. Finally, the cosmopolitan knowledge accumulated over the last century on the process of human development and learning will also contribute to the reassessment of the critical issues.

The Critical Issues

Some critical issues emerge from the dilemmas we are facing regarding secondary school development: expansion and equity, purpose and definition, preparation for work, structure and curriculum. Other issues have been public commitments such as quality and increased enrollment, and still others are practical limitations of the system (financing and management, for example). Some reformers reduce the analysis of secondary education to two main issues, one quantitative change and the other qualitative change. However the following seven issues, critical for policy-making, will be discussed in this report. They frame potential strategic choices, and provide useful categories for comparing experiences and examining available knowledge.

1. Expansion and Equity

2. Purpose and Definition

3. Preparation for Work

4. Structure and Curriculum

5. Management and Participation

6. Teaching

7. Learning

All of these issues are closely related in such a way that one can not discuss the issues of expansion without defining the limits and function of secondary education, or discuss

curriculum problems without considering structure and the certification process. Yet each of these issues is an open door for analyzing and proposing adequate solutions or advancing practical knowledge.

Expansion and Equity

After a period of focusing on primary education, the majority of Latin American countries have shifted their focus to secondary education. All of them, with the exception of Nicaragua and Guatemala, have achieved a net enrollment rate of above 90% at the primary school level. But at present, their secondary school enrollment rates would have to double to achieve the goals established by the Summit of the Americas. Nevertheless, this international agreement assumes a response to the following three questions:

- *When is the appropriate time to expand access to secondary schools*? Is it not more important for countries to first improve the quality of primary or basic education to avoid low quality secondary education that in turn perpetuates social inequalities, as happened in several countries in their rush to achieve quantitative goals for primary education? How should growth limits on secondary education be defined? Do the rates of return play a role? What lessons emerge from the experience of countries from other regions of the world that have rapidly expanded secondary education?

- *Should secondary education be compulsory and a responsibility of the State*? School expansion is not merely a quantitative issue. It has legal and financial dimensions as well. For example, will an effort to increase access to education be successful only if attendance is made compulsory? Who should finance this growth? Governments? Private companies? Individuals?[3]

  Private education is an important component of the secondary school market in several Latin American countries. Private schools account for over 30% of secondary schools in Colombia, Dominican Republic and Venezuela, more than 40% per cent in Chile and nearly 60% in El Salvador. Is this a trend that should be supported? Another issue is that of decentralization. Private schools have subsisted in centralized environments. What will be their future in a decentralized system?

  Since an investment in secondary education might require larger allocations from the government compared to those required for primary or early education, it should be considered beyond its intrinsic value. Prioritizing secondary education within limited national budgets thus implies looking outside of the school sphere at what increased quality and access could positively impact: labor markets, national economic competitiveness, employment of the poor, adolescent health, and the strengthening of national social capital and democracy.

- *Is the expansion of secondary education a vehicle of equity*? Secondary education in Latin America has traditionally served students able to continue to higher levels of

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[3] Secondary education financing may be a separate critical issue. In this report is discussed under two issues: expansion and management.

education. The issue before us is whether a massive secondary education system (through increased access) would necessarily have limitations of quality. Equity, however, is not defined exclusively by access. Several sources of social inequalities determine individual destinies. Access to secondary education is one. Another is the difference of education supply, and the other is disparity in results or performance. For this reason the questions of quality and equity cannot be separated in a policy of school expansion.

Purpose and Definition

THe crux of the problem policy makers on secondary education are facing is a philosophical rather than a technical matter and can be reduced to a simple question. What is the nature and purpose of this level of education?

Secondary education has served several purposes throughout history: preparing young people for productive employment, forming responsible citizens, selecting candidates for higher education, preparing students to become healthy parents, helping youth to develop socially, teaching mathematics, science and social studies. Secondary education, as an institution, is now confronted with a multi-faceted audience. Institutions of higher education, local communities and the labor market need secondary education to prepare students for their respective endeavors, thereby placing conflicting pressures on secondary education policy-makers.

Conflicts naturally arise because at the secondary level the two main functions of education converge. The first is the individual function: personal development, preparation for an occupation, and training for higher cognitive functioning. The second function is social and includes nation building, economic development and poverty alleviation. Debates on the aims of secondary education involve these issues and frame policy making. They can be reduced fundamentally to establishing whether secondary education has intrinsic purposes, and if so, if those purposes are mainly civic, about social capital development, or are defined by its contribution to economic development.

- Does secondary education have *its own goals*, or is it only a springboard that leads to a higher level. Traditional academic or grammar schools are built on this assumption, and so education for work is conducted in other institutions or at other levels of education. A prototype of the academic secondary education is the International Baccalaureate that offers the opportunity for advanced classes and espouses international recognition.

- Would increased demand for secondary education increase the *range of purposes of secondary schools*? Is it useful to have different schools at the same level for diverse purposes?

"Social capital"—less visible than physical capital and more difficult to measure than human capital— is the infrastructure of civic and community life, necessary to generate norms of reciprocity and civic commitment, that is, to develop the characteristics of

social organization that facilitate cooperation and coordination for mutual benefit. Social capital reveals through nexus what networks create through social norms and mutual confidence, and is supported by education and successful experiences of cooperation.

- Who has the responsibility of *forming the social capital of the nation*, the social cohesiveness of values and citizen attitudes? Families? Non-formal education programs? Schools?

- Is preparation for work an essential aim of secondary education? For all students or only for those with a vocation not requiring a university degree? This question introduces us to the following issue that because of its relevance for nations and individuals deserves to be treated separately.

In addition to the difficulties in identifying its purpose, secondary education has a definitional problem in terms of time (how many years) and location (its place in the architecture of the educational system). Countries have defined secondary education in different ways throughout the past century when the expansion of this level of education became an indicator of general development and relatively similar policy issues began to emerge. Definitional problems are closely related to the questions of structure and curriculum.
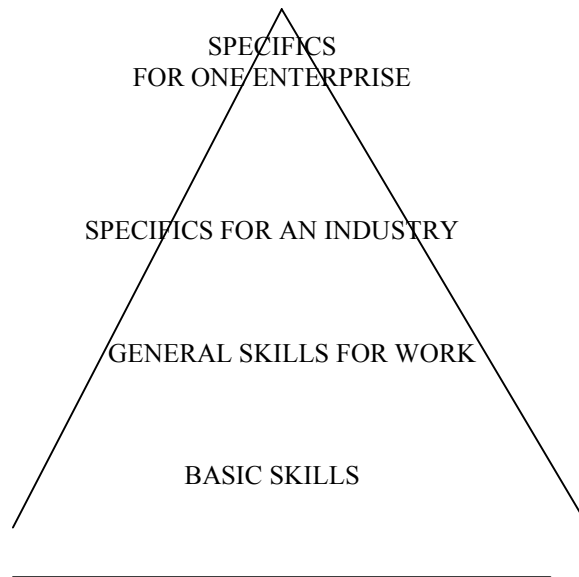
Preparation for Work

Young people are victims of the structural transformation and work crisis in the developing world. In several Latin American and Caribbean countries the number of unemployed and out-of-school youth has increased. Paradoxically, the numbers of private and public programs that prepare individuals for work and add to the traditional schemes of vocational education have multiplied.

- What is *the contribution of secondary schools to work preparation*? Is it developing skills for a specific enterprise? Knowledge and skills for an industrial area? General skills and work attitudes? Strengthening basic skills provided by primary education, as shown by the pyramid in illustration 1?

- What role can schools play in the *vocational orientation of youth* and their connection with local businesses?

- How can we respond to the work-training needs of youth that leave school before enrolling in higher secondary education?

Perhaps each schooling level provides a unique contribution to preparation for work. Moreover, education for work does not end with conventional education. Basic education and secondary education play a dominant role in the formation of competencies for employability (general competencies and worker's personality). Therefore, who is responsible for the development of specific work skills?

- Would it be better to have a secondary education system capable of integrating their graduates to other levels of education or other institutions where professional education is provided? *How could the different functions of secondary education and training be integrated into a national model*? This question opens the discussion of the following issue-- the structure of secondary education.

ILLUSTRATION 1: SKILLS FOR WORK

SPECIFICS
FOR ONE ENTERPRISE

SPECIFICS FOR AN INDUSTRY

GENERAL SKILLS FOR WORK

BASIC SKILLS

In addition, a model for secondary school must resolve what to do with the vocational education organizations that exist in all countries of the region, but in most cases, have little or no technological capacity and practice social discrimination.

Structure and Curriculum

The schooling process is based upon the debatable assumption that all children learn at a similar pace, and that their ages correspond to a particular grade that in turn is organized in cycles. In some countries there are two cycles of similar duration (six years of primary education and six years of secondary education), in others a long cycle of ten years and a short cycle of two years, and in other cases three similar cycles, one primary, a lower secondary and a higher secondary. In practice is not easy to respond to diverse needs, especially when the dropout rates suggest that a considerable number of children abandon school several years before concluding lower secondary school. When a large number of older youth attend secondary school (reflected in differences between gross and net enrollment rates), go part-time to school or enroll in evening courses, it is all the more difficult.

The next structural question is if lower secondary education is better conceived as part of primary education in its function and curriculum or if it has a different purpose beyond providing basic skills and knowledge. And finally there is a fact that the transition from primary to secondary school presents particular difficulties to children, especially to poor, rural and indigenous children.

The structure of secondary education has been and will continue being a matter of controversy. In OECD countries, for example, there are several models ranging from selective systems with diverse and parallel secondary schools (vocational and academic) to comprehensive and common schools for all students. These alternative paths frame a critical policy question:

- What kind of structure best responds to the goals that a particular country has set for the education of its youth. *A common school for all youth, two types of schools, or several types of schools*? For example, an integrated school for first cycle and a differentiated school for a second cycle?

Secondary education structure goes beyond the establishment of a particular schooling model. It should define the relationship of this level with higher education, with primary education and with other organizations that provide work training.

In a country with low secondary school enrollment rates, most of its graduates generally tend to enroll in universities. Classic curriculum prepares them for higher learning and selects students for the diverse demands of the higher education market. Rapid expansion of secondary education poses a different situation for school curriculum in terms of the diversity of needs of a heterogeneous clientele. The dilemma for those in charge of defining school curricula policies increases, and is three-fold. The first issue is about general versus specific education. The second is about unity and diversity, that is, core curriculum versus the diversity of alternatives available for different needs. The third is the tension between the universal, national and local.

- Should secondary school curriculum prepare *generalists or specialists*? If secondary school were a terminal stage for all students this question would be easier to answer. But this is no longer the case. As secondary education expands, the demand for higher education also increases. Often secondary graduates of middle and low social classes do not find a place in the top universities and continue their studies in lower quality schools, repeating the cycle of expansion without increasing quality or expectations. What happens instead is the generation of greater inequalities. Although this debate still persists, the curriculum seems to be moving irreversibly toward the general rather than the specialized.

- What can we learn from the experience of countries that have established two options for the last three years of secondary education?

- As the needs of a diverse student body grow, curriculum development specialists should ask themselves about the composition and structure of a *common curriculum*

for all students. For some, the common core curriculum of secondary education is science and mathematics, and the process of discovering and learning. Others, particularly in Latin America, are developing the notion of "cross disciplinary issues" (temas transversales).

In any case, school curriculum in the information age is every day closer to the evolution of technology. The relationship between *technology and curriculum in secondary education* is twofold. The first aspect is the consideration of technology as an instrument of school curriculum. Its main focus is the potential use of technology for increasing the number of information sources and search tools across subjects and for exercising technology-related skills. The key question would be asked in terms of the added value of technology for school learning. The second aspect is the consideration of technology as a content area of school curriculum, focusing on the need for all secondary students to be prepared for the changing work place. The key question would be what students should know about technology, what important technological competencies are required for the general work environment and for continuing education, and at what level of performance students need to develop such competencies.

The experience of Latin America in using technology as a learning instrument dates to several decades ago when various distance education programs were initiated in several countries, some of which are still in operation. Virtual secondary education follows similar principles, although with new information technologies. It may be useful to identify the lessons learned from those experiences. We should also try to think how to consolidate the purposes of expansion, quality and equity under those schemes. However, we must also consider that learning contexts are constantly changing with new available resources. How can secondary education benefit from these possibilities?

Management and Participation

The movement towards educational decentralization inaugurated in Latin America, as part of an institutional reform with limited implementation seems to be oriented now in the direction of providing greater autonomy to educational organizations. From a spatial conception it is redefining roles. The role of the State, within the mentality of the "New Public Administration" is transformed from a provider to a buyer of services, and from subject of evaluation to evaluator. State activities are no longer predominantly bureaucratic, but strategic, including planning, goal establishment, standard setting, measurement and evaluation. Other actors may be involved in the provision of social services while communities and families are empowered to participate. Summarizing these concerns, The Summit of the Americas in Santiago proposed to "strengthen education management and decentralization and provide better forms of community and family involvement."

The adjacent purpose of this proposition is reforming institutions; i.e. reforming the rules of the game motivate the behavior of the main actors of the education process. On one hand, the objective is to make the educational system more efficient, and on the other hand, to engage the users of the system--families and entrepreneurs. Often the rules that

constitute the institutional framework and the asymmetric information produced by the system favor some groups with vested interests in education, permitting that the interests of the agents (politicians, bureaucrats, teacher union directors) prevail over the interests of the principal actors (children and their families). In practice, schools and localities receive greater managerial autonomy and support for the development of institutional projects. Nevertheless, clear policies on this issue should answer the following questions:

- *Who is responsible for and manages available resources? Families? Teachers? School Directors?*

- *What kinds of responsibilities* are provided to autonomous schools? Managerial? Financial? Human Resources? Curriculum?

- How is the budgeting process conducted and *financial resources* assigned?

- *What could influence the Ministry of Education to adapt the learning and innovation capacity reforms they promote to new rules of the game?*

- In the case of secondary education, participation benefits the students and the entrepreneurs, the direct beneficiaries of the school's outcome. What participation can be envisaged?

- What may be the contribution of the *private sector* beyond the financial support of isolated activities?

Teaching

We know that the teachers themselves, their capacity and dedication, and their performance at school are the basic resource for student learning. They also represent the largest item in the education budget. However, we are not sure what the policies are to encourage adequate preparation of teachers and to bolster their school performance to be reflected in indicators of school learning. Potential policies include teacher selection and preparation, deployment, professional career, evaluation and incentives.

A secondary school teacher, as opposed to a primary school teacher, tends to be a specialist in a certain discipline, and unlike a university professor, has pedagogical training. Having better secondary school teachers perhaps requires answering questions such as the following:

- *To attract the best students to the teaching career,* what incentives should we provide them to continue their careers in education?

- How can we achieve *a balance between theory and practice,* and between subject matter knowledge and pedagogical experience in the preparation of secondary school teachers?

- What *teacher evaluation* system would improve teaching standards?

- What *incentives* should a society provide to keep good teachers in the classrooms?

- How can we facilitate *teacher access to international circuits of knowledge*?

Learning

The goal of school is learning. Teaching is the principal means to achieve such a goal. What is learned and how it is learned is a critical issue for secondary schools. All countries of Latin American and Caribbean region have established some kind of learning evaluation system that attempts to establish what the students should know and how to be sure that they have learned (curriculum standards), with the purpose of improving the quality of that learning (performance standards). All education policy has this final objective. Fortunately there is an accumulation of research and international experience that may help us to refine our recent efforts if guided by questions such as the following:

- What *can we learn from recent international studies* on school learning by youth? Why do Latin American students show lower scores than their counterparts in other regions of the world?

- What has been the *utility of evaluation services created in the region* to monitor the quality of learning results? Has their selection function predominated over the improvement function?

- How have the national systems of *work competencies* performed?

- How can we use the results of the studies of *school effectiveness* conducted in the region and outside of the region?

- How have *national supervision systems* improved teaching?

- How can we offer adequate support to poor youth enrolled in secondary schools?