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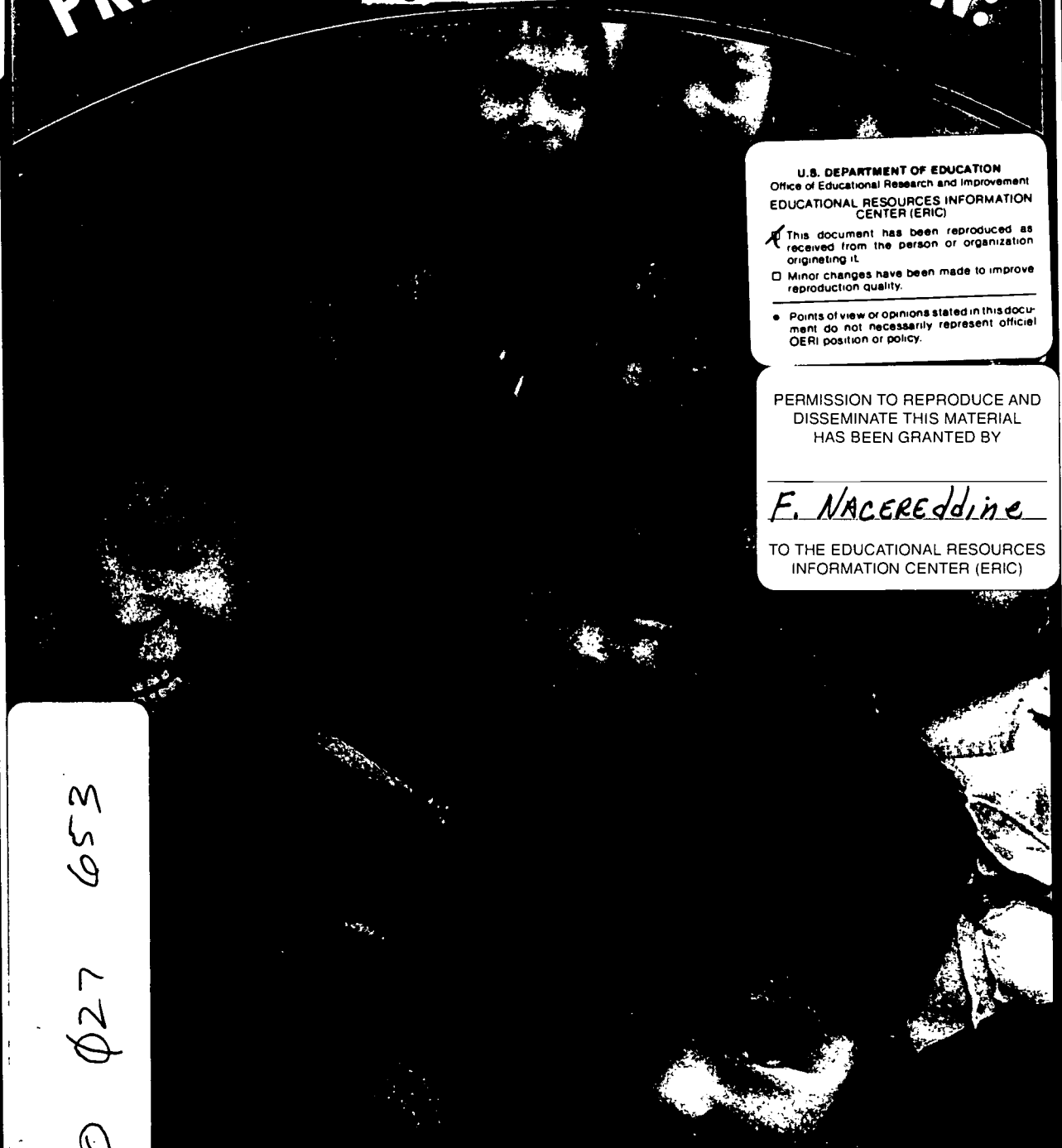
ABSTRACT

This booklet comes from a workshop, "School Repetition: a Global Perspective," held in Geneva (Switzerland) in February 1995, and the subsequent dialogue. The document is the first state-of-the-art approximation on school repetition. This highly complex phenomenon assumes different characteristics in different contexts and is defined and measured in various ways. Analysis of available information reveals that repetition is a significant quantitative phenomenon throughout the developing world, that it is concentrated within the first grades of school and in schools attended by students from low-income sectors, that is has devastating social and psychological impact on students who repeat and their families, and that it has a high financial cost. This document provides a beginning for analysis of repetition on a global scale. Sections include: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "The Dimensions of the Repetition Phenomenon"; (3) "Repetition: A Problem or a Solution?"; (4) "Factors Associated with Repetition"; (5) "Social Attitudes and Repetition"; and (6) "Various Strategies to Overcome Repetition." Charts and graphs accompany the text. (EH)

PRIMARY SCHOOL REPETITION:

a global perspective



INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION/UNICEF

Contents

how is it possible that so many students have to repeat their grades?

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Cover photo: UNICEF/Sean Sprague

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Foreword

Basic education — meeting the basic learning needs of children, youth and adults — has developed as a priority over the past ten years, for both governments and international agencies involved in the education sector. The World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990) has thus accomplished one of its important goals. However, as underscored by the Jomtien conference, achieving 'education for all' implies not only an expansion in coverage but a significant modification of the parameters—curricular, educational, administrative, financial communicational—that underlie the conventional education model. Ensuring equity and quality education for all implies, among others, overcoming the 'culture of failure' that is embedded in school systems and that primarily affects the poor. School repetition, a widely extensive phenomenon in low-income countries, is a demonstrable manifestation of the inadequacy of school systems to respond to the conditions, potential and needs of the population, and particularly those of children coming from disadvantaged social sectors.

Combined with insufficient coverage, repetition, drop-out and low learning achievement are critical problems facing school systems in low-income countries. Enrolment has traditionally been the principal concern and the educational indicator of key consideration. Drop-out and low learning achievement have gained attention in recent years and there is growing consensus on the importance and magnitude of the problem. Repetition, on the other hand, has been somewhat opaque in school statistics—both at the school and at the national and international levels—scarcely researched and analyzed, and seldom taken into account in the definition of educational policies and programmes. In general, there persists a limited awareness of the magnitude and seriousness of school repetition, and lack of clarity regarding coping strategies and mechanisms.

Against this context, UNICEF and UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE) decided to co-operate towards building awareness on school repetition, understanding it better and thus creating the conditions for more effective action to deal with it at both the national and the international levels. In this joint effort, both organizations agreed to: (a) collect and systematize available information on school repetition at the global level; (b) organize a specialized workshop to discuss the issue; (c) prepare a journalistic kit for wide dissemination; and (d) prepare a state-of-the-art report on repetition, based on both bibliographic review and workshop discussions, aimed at informing educators, specialists and decision-makers in the education sector.

The workshop 'School Repetition: A Global Perspective' was held in February 1995 in Geneva and was convened by UNICEF and the IBE. Its purpose was to share accumulated knowledge and experience on repetition, with a focus on low-income countries, and to encourage discussion on its nature, magnitude, causes and policy strategies to deal with repetition. A small group of specialists was invited to enable in-depth discussions. Given the complexity and diversity of factors involved in repetition, an effort was made to ensure that participants came not only from different regions and realities but also from different disciplines and professional areas relevant to the topic discussed—including curriculum, pedagogy, linguistics, psycho-linguistics, teacher education, administration and statistics. The participants consisted of Paul Achola, Massimo Amadio, Nabil Constantine, Justa Ezpeleta, Emilia Ferreiro, Raúl Gagliardi, Aklilu Habte, Ruben Klein, Abel Koulaninga, Luis Enrique López, Victor Ordoñez, Ernesto Schiefelbein, Juan Carlos Tedesco, Luis

Foreword

repetition is a significant quantitative phenomenon throughout the developing world, that it is concentrated within the first grades of school and in schools attended by students from low-income sectors, . . . it has devastating social and psychological impact on the students who repeat and their families, and . . . has a high financial cost. All of which calls for repetition to be considered a serious problem that school systems must not only alleviate, but resolve

Tiburcio, Rosa María Torres and Arrerat Wattanasin. A brief biographical note on each of the workshop participants is provided at the end of the report.

A previous draft of this document was used as a working document during the workshop. The present version has been enriched by workshop discussions, inputs and comments by several participants, and the analysis of additional documentation collected or produced after the workshop. Both the working document and this version of the report were prepared by Massimo Amadio. Juan Carlos Tedesco (Director, IBE) and Rosa María Torres (Senior Education Adviser, UNICEF Education Cluster) were in charge of the overall co-ordination of the project and the editing of this report.

The document now presented for discussion is a first state-of-the-art approximation on school repetition. Its reading permits an appreciation of this highly complex phenomenon and the realization that it assumes different characteristics in different contexts, and is defined and measured in varied ways. Beyond such differences, however, analysis of available information reveals that repetition is a significant quantitative phenomenon throughout the developing world, that it is concentrated within the first grades of school and in schools attended by students from low-income sectors, that it has devastating social and psychological impact on the students who repeat and their families, and that is has a high financial cost. All of which calls for repetition to be considered a serious problem that school systems must not only alleviate, but resolve.

This document is a beginning for an analysis of repetition on a global scale. Although repetition is increasingly incorporated as an indicator in international statistical compendiums, most available studies conducted thus far have been limited to a local, national or regional level. Advancing on the line of a global perception of the repetition phenomenon enriches its understanding, and allows an appreciation of the various factors that intervene and the diverse strategies applied in different contexts and countries. Indeed, getting to know the realities of others is essential for better understanding one's own reality and acting on it more effectively

PHOTO: WHO

1. Introduction

Making basic education available to all, that is, meeting the basic learning needs of all children, youths and adults, is the main objective of developing countries and international organizations in the educational sector in the final decade of the twentieth century.

Ever since the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990), the expansion and improvement of basic education has regained a prominent place on the agenda of the main international organizations and bilateral co-operation agencies, and in the action plans prepared by educational authorities in the majority of developing countries. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by over 160 States, has helped to establish education not only as a necessity but also as a fundamental right.

Despite the economic difficulties experienced in the 1980s, impressive advances have been achieved in the last thirty years in terms of spreading primary education. Enrolment has grown considerably, especially in the 1970s. The number of schools has doubled and that of teachers tripled. Both in Asia and in Latin America, the education systems of many countries now have sufficient capacity to attend to their whole school-age population, and would already be in a position to ensure universal access to primary education (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1992; UNESCO, 1991; 1993*d*; UNESCO/UNICEF, 1993).

Despite these advances, however, there are some problems still in the way of achieving the desired objectives which should not be overlooked.

LACK OF ACCESS

The first problem, and perhaps the one which has received the most constant attention, arises from the large numbers of boys and girls who still have no access to the education system. In 1990, there were some 130 million children in that situation, more than half of whom were concentrated in four countries (Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan). Two thirds of them were girls.

The main difficulty with trying to make primary education universally available may reside either in capacity limitation, cultural factors (especially in the case of women) or the direct and indirect costs of education, especially for the poorest social sectors. In Nicaragua, for instance, it is estimated that the minimum annual cost for every child in primary school is equivalent to 20% of a peasant's average income (UNICEF, 1995).

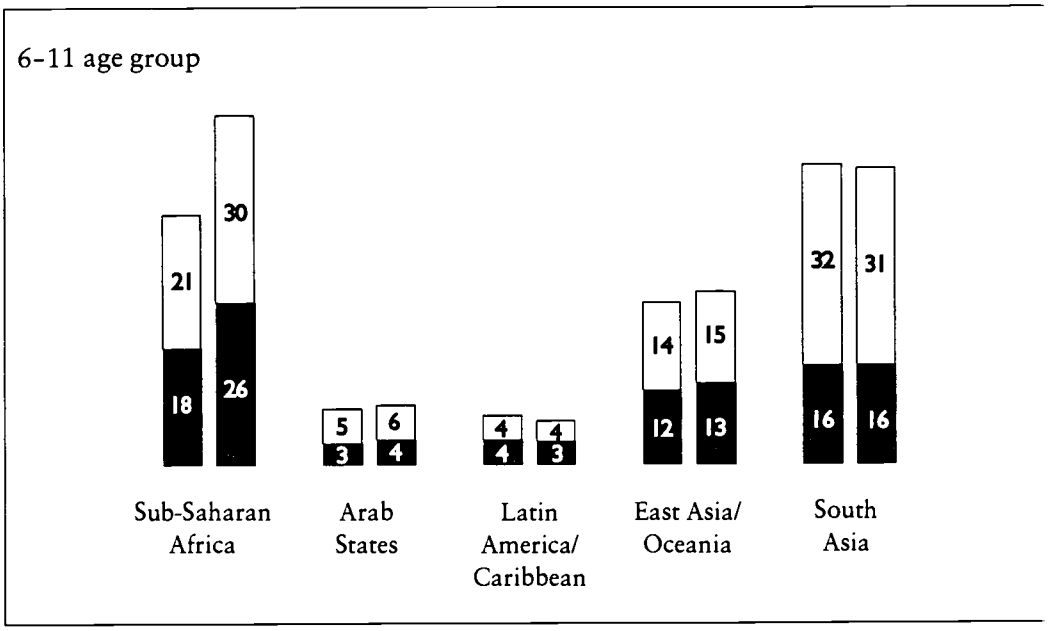
The resources required either to consolidate or to increase the supply of basic education are undoubtedly very significant, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. It is worth noting, however, that in the period 1980-1987, per capita public expenditure on education fell by 40% in Latin America and 75% in Africa (Colclough & Lewin, 1993, p. 20); furthermore, international aid to the educational sector fell by 15% between 1975 and 1985, while as a percentage of total aid, it declined from

TABLE 1: Estimation of the net rate of school attendance by the 6–11, 12–17 and 18–23[1] age groups, by region, 1995

	6–11		12–17		18–23	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Sub-Saharan Africa	55.2	47.4	46.0	35.3	9.7	4.9
Arab States	83.9	71.6	59.2	47.1	24.5	16.3
Latin America/Caribbean	88.5	87.5	68.4	67.4	26.1	26.3
East Asia/Oceania	88.6	85.5	54.7	51.4	19.5	13.6
South Asia	84.3	65.6	50.5	32.2	12.4	6.6
Developed countries	92.3	91.7	87.1	88.5	40.8	42.7

1. Pupils/students of each age group as a percentage of the total population of this age group.

FIGURE 1: Estimation (in millions) of the number of young people out-of-school in developing countries, 1990 and 2000



17% in 1970 to a little over 10% from 1985 to 1989 (ibid., p. 242-43).

In South Asia, population growth represents a serious challenge in terms of the additional resources required to continue expanding educational services. In the 1980s, in Africa as a whole (fifty-one countries) the school-age population grew faster than enrolment, so that the gross rate of school attendance fell from 79% in 1980 to 72% in 1988 (UNESCO, 1991*a*).

DROPOUT

The second problem is the high proportion of temporary absenteeism and early dropout in school. Nowadays access to education has improved and the average time spent by pupils in the school system has gradually increased. According to UNESCO estimates, while two-thirds of dropouts occurred in the first grade of primary school in 1970, by 1980 the proportion had fallen to 50%. Nevertheless, almost a quarter of all pupils failed to complete primary school, and it is estimated that, out of the 95 million children enrolled in the first grade in the world in 1988, 25 million did not complete the fourth grade (Brunswic, 1994, p. 12).

In the case of Asia, for instance, according to 1985 statistical data, in India, Myanmar and Pakistan only half of the children enrolled in the first grade ever reach the fifth; in Bangladesh and Laos, a little over one-third (UNESCO, 1992), while in Nepal only 27% completed the early years of primary school, with a dropout rate of 40% in the first grade (UNESCO, 1987).

A considerable number of children experience difficulty progressing from one grade to another at the right time, do not derive full benefit from the time they spend at school and, in many cases, are never again given any opportunity to learn once they have left school.

Absenteeism and temporary and final dropout are usually associated with the conditions of poverty and low income levels of very large social sectors. However, learning results vary considerably from one educational establishment to another, which indicates that the qual-

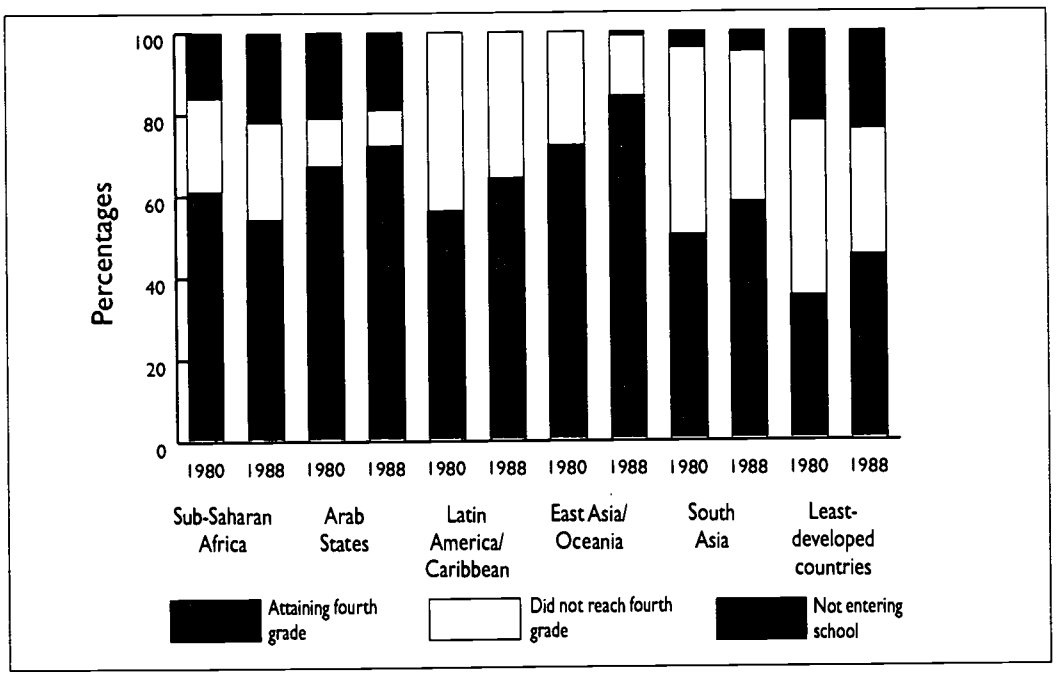


FIGURE 2: Rate of school attendance and dropout in primary school, 1980 and 1988

Source: The impact of primary education on literacy. *Statisticed issues* (Paris, UNESCO), no. 8, February 1992.

ity of schools plays an important part in the decision whether to stay on or leave. A long-term study carried out on a sample of primary school children in Egypt (Hanushek & Lavy, 1994) suggests that students are aware of the difference in the quality of schools and tend to stay on in the better quality establishments, taking the view that one year of attendance at the latter may be equivalent to over two years in a poorer quality school.

REPETITION

The third problem is related to the significant number of students who repeat courses, especially in the early grades of primary school. This means that a considerable number of boys and girls entering the education system experience not the pleasure and satisfaction of learning, but only the frustration of having to start their studies all over again.

Repetition in primary school, and its connection with learning and school failure, have been the subject of much research in recent decades, looking into both the size of the phenomenon and its causes, as well as trying to identify better ways of gradually reducing its frequency. In this respect, it is worth recalling the International Conferences on Education convened by UNESCO in 1970, on the theme of the improvement of teaching, and in 1984, on the universalization and reform of primary education, for which various studies and statistical analyses were prepared on repetition and the way it was evolving.

In other words, the problem has long been familiar, although it has taken on new profiles with the switch from elitist, highly selective education systems to mass public education, and with the growing concern with making efficient use of available resources.

II. The dimensions of the repetition phenomenon

Exactly what is known at present about the dimensions of repetition in developing countries? A quick look at the specialized literature and comparisons made over the last decades appears to highlight at least two critical aspects of the phenomenon: its *persistence* and its *magnitude*, which have been substantially underestimated (see box).

These figures offer only an incomplete and partially outdated general view, considering that the available data refer basically to 1990 and do not cover all countries. There are no reliable data, for instance, concerning some countries with very large school-age populations, such as Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan and Viet Nam. The many conflicts which broke out after 1990 in Africa, as in several Balkan countries, have had devastating effects on education. In Russia and several countries of Eastern Europe, the serious socio-economic crisis has had a negative impact on the quality of public social services, while little is known about the situation as regards education in the new former Soviet republics, especially those of Central Asia.

Furthermore, as explained in the section below, official statistics do not provide a fair picture of the real situation and tend to underestimate the magnitude of repetition.

DEFINING AND MEASURING REPETITION

There are various definitions of and

PERSISTENCE AND MAGNITUDE OF REPETITION

Although very few studies have been made about the trend of repetition in different countries, it seems safe to say that the education systems which have managed gradually and steadily to reduce its magnitude are few and far between. While general data obviously do not give any idea of the great diversity of situations, they do provide an overall insight into the main trends.

Around 1980, official statistics for primary education in sixty-nine countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia indicated a figure of over 17 million cases of repetition, almost half in Latin America (Blat Gimeno, 1984). This total did not include some countries which were very significant in terms of enrolment, such as China and India.

From a comparative point of view, taking 1970 data for ninety-eight countries as a reference point (excluding China, India, Pakistan and Nigeria), UNESCO's Statistical Office (1984, p. 356) found that in the 1970s, despite a slight decrease in the average percentage for Latin America and Africa, and a more significant decrease in Asia, the total number of repeating children had increased by 41.1% in Africa, 45.7% in Latin America and 7.3% in Asia and Oceania, a trend which appeared to be closely related to a spectacular growth of enrolment in the same period (58.8%, 49.7% and 52.3% respectively).

The highest rate of repetition was observed in the final grade of primary school in twenty-two out of thirty-three African countries (ibid., p. 357), a higher occurrence of repetition in the first grade in the case of Latin America, and a notable difference with regard to the impact of the phenomenon between French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking African countries on the one hand and English-speaking countries on the other (p. 349-53). These situations tended to persist in the 1980s.

By 1990, official figures supplied for eighty-four countries (UNESCO, 1993c) showed a total of almost 35.6 million cases of repetition in primary school. Apart from the larger enrolment effect, the significant increase compared with 1980 data was due to a great extent to the availability of statistics from China and India (7.5 and 3.5 million respectively), two countries which on their own accounted for almost a third of the total number of cases. If Brazil (nearly 5 million cases) and Mexico (1.3 million) are added to these two, the four countries together total practically half the number of cases of repetition in the developing world.

Regional situations, while also tending to mask the diversity within them, do highlight some interesting tendencies.

In the African countries, compared with 1980 data, there was an increase both in the total number of repetitions and in their overall percentage, especially in sub-

methods of calculating repetitions, which are closely linked to the structure of an education system, the way it is organized and the administrative procedures used to regulate the progress of students through grades and levels (Russel, Kinsey & McGinn, 1972). There is plenty of evidence to show that official statistics employ criteria which underestimate repetition, because repeating children are counted as dropouts or new entrants (Cuadra, 1989; Costa Ribeiro, 1990; Klein & Costa Ribeiro, 1991; Klein, 1995).

If matriculation data by age and by grade are used instead, as well as census data and *household surveys* (e.g. Fletcher & Costa Ribeiro, 1989; Klein & Costa Ribeiro, 1991; Gargiulo & Crouch, 1994), the results turn out to be very different from the official figures.

As mentioned above, many pupils classified as dropouts in the early grades are in fact repetitions rather than dropouts (Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993, p. 22). There are cases of early admissions to the first grade (used as a form of pre-schooling), where pupils repeat until they have reached the right age (for the situation in Nepal, see Williams et al., 1993). One widespread practice is to keep in the same grade pupils who, despite having reached a satisfactory standard, are considered by their families or teachers to need further learning before moving on to the next grade (in Brazil, almost 10% of first grade enrolment is made up of this type of repetition) (see Klein & Costa Ribeiro, 1991,

Saharan Africa (data relating to thirty-three countries). Repetition has reached alarming proportions, particularly in the French- and Portuguese-speaking countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where in many cases overall percentages close to or above 25% of school enrolment may be observed, significantly higher than in other regions of the world. These countries therefore have to face the double problem of a public education system with insufficient coverage and poor internal efficiency, so that the limited number of children actually receiving education experience considerable difficulty in achieving any steady progress through the system.

In the English-speaking countries, the percentage of repetition cases is lower, apart from the last grade of primary school, a fairly common situation in countries where very selective tests have to be passed for admission to secondary school.

It might be interesting to look into the reasons for these substantial, persisting differences between countries belonging to different language areas and different colonial traditions in Africa (such as differences in promotion standards, the way the education systems are organized, the way repetition is defined and measured, or different social, economic and historical backgrounds).

In the Arab countries of North Africa (excluding the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, for which no data are available after 1980), the tendency has been towards a decline in the percentage and an increase in the total number of repetitions. The only exception is Morocco, where both of these figures have fallen.

In the Arab States (data relating to ten countries), the repetition trend appears to indicate a fall in the overall percentage and an increase in the number of repetitions, with the exception of Djibouti, Jordan and Iraq, where both figures increased (allowing for the fact that the data for Iraq are for 1988, prior to the Gulf War).

A less uniform pattern emerges in Asia and Oceania, for which available information is more limited. In any event, both the percentage and the number of repetitions increased in three countries (Bhutan, Indonesia and Laos), while they fell in two others (Bangladesh and Thailand), the percentage remaining unchanged in a further two (the Philippines, where the total number declined, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, where repetitions increased).

In Latin America and the Caribbean (data relating to twenty countries), while both the percentage and the total number of repetitions tended to decrease in ten countries, the number increased in six (and both figures rose in Costa Rica). Generally speaking, however, the percentage of children repeating the first grade of primary school continues to be very high (close to or above 15%, according to official data) in many countries.

DISCREPANCY BETWEEN OFFICIAL AND NON-OFFICIAL DATA ON REPETITION

A 1986 study carried out in Honduras, which compared official data with information supplied by families, estimated the repetition rate at 51.7% in the first grade compared with an official estimate of 27.3%. An analysis of the difference showed that there was a substantial overestimation of dropouts and of the number of new pupils entering the system (Cuadra, 1989).

Studies made in Brazil using the Profluxo model arrived at the conclusion that in 1982 the repetition rate was 52.4% (against the official figure of 29.6%) and a very low level of dropouts in the first grade, at only 2.3% (compared with the official figure of 25.5%). Until a short time ago, the Brazilian education system considered only students who enrolled again in the same grade after failing owing to low qualifications or irregular attendance as repetitions. Students who dropped out before the end of the school year without having failed and who returned to the same grade were classified as new entrants (see Klein, 1995; Costa Ribeiro, 1990).

A 1993 study carried out in Nicaragua (Gargiulo &Crouch, 1994) concluded that the real repetition rate there was 33% higher than the official figure, and that on the other hand the official dropout figures were overestimated. It also concluded that the rate of school attendance on average was higher than expected and the number of graduating students 40% above the figure estimated in official statistics (ibid., p. 40).

p. 38). In some cases, students remain in the same grade despite having been promoted and are then considered as repetitions, simply because the school does not have a higher grade and the students are unable to move to another school (for the case of Honduras, see McGinn & Reimers, 1992; for Brazil, see Klein, 1995).

The studies made concerning the differences in repetition rates due to the methods used refer particularly to the case of Latin America. They show that for the 1980s the real repetition rate was practically double the average rate indicated by official statistics (see Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993).

Assuming these estimates are reasonable, towards the end of the 1980s in Latin America the real percentage of repetitions in the first six grades of primary school would amount to 30.9% (UNESCO/UNICEF, 1993, p. 22), compared with the figure of 15.3% officially declared by the countries, while the real repetition rate in the first grade would be as high as 41.4% on average, instead of the official rate of 21.7%. In overall terms, the total number of primary school repetitions in the region would then be close to 20.5 million (more than double that indicated in official data), mostly concentrated in Brazil (11.4 million) and in three other countries (Mexico, 2.7 million; Argentina and Colombia, around 1 million each) (ibid.).

The studies carried out in Latin America highlight the need to pay more attention not only to the methodology used to analyze the information, but also to the quality of the statistical data on repetition produced by the schools and the dissemination of the data once processed. This problem is undoubtedly not restricted to Latin America. A sectoral mission of the World Bank carried out in 1993 in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (one of the most backward in the country) observed that the data collected manually by the teachers were not reliable, because the 15% of pupils who changed school each year were not reported.

The available documentation is not sufficient, however, to establish clearly whether repetition is an underestimated problem also in other regions, and to what extent.

Repetition rates in Africa, and particularly in sub-Saharan countries, are already a matter of concern. If they are under-

estimated, then the problem could take on truly alarming proportions. On the other hand, the need to continue expanding the educational supply at the same rate as demographic growth, starting from the existing low level of coverage, might well have the effect of further reducing the internal efficiency of the school system and offering an even lower standard of basic education.

The situation in Asia is fairly similar to that of Latin America. Some studies carried out in China, for instance, suggest that there is a significant underestimation of repetition there, especially in the first grade and in rural areas. In the province of Ansai, while official statistics indicate an average repetition rate of 5%, in many schools more than 50% of fourth grade pupils have repeated at least once and only 30% of pupils complete primary school in six years (Colclough & Lewin, 1993, p. 93). For three other provinces (Shaanxi, Guizhou and Hubei), calculations based on the most reliable methods estimated an average repetition rate for the period 1980-88 of 30-33%, with a total of between 8 and 9 million repetitions in the first grade for the country as a whole, mainly due to temporary dropout among pupils in rural areas (Schiefelbein, 1990*b*).

If, on the basis of those calculations, we accept the estimate of over 50 million repetitions in Latin America and Asia together, and in the light of the serious educational situation of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, there is clearly a need to pay more attention to the phenomenon of repetition. Owing to its dimensions, it could be considered one of the main causes of internal inefficiency in education systems and one of the main obstacles preventing the achievement of universal access to primary education.

The way repetition is calculated is by no means a secondary consideration. Data obtained with different methods tend to be contradictory and suggest very different action strategies. For instance, two studies on repetition carried out in Nicaragua arrive at almost opposite conclusions: in one case, it was found that the real dropout rate was almost double that estimated officially, while repetition rates tended to coincide (UNICEF, 1995); another study, however, concluded that

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repetition rates in Africa, and particularly in sub-Saharan countries, are already a matter of concern

repetition was underestimated and that official statistics tended to overestimate dropout (Gargiulo & Crouch, 1994). The two conclusions will point to different strategies. If the real problem is dropout, then policies aimed at making basic education universally available should concentrate on increasing the system's supply (by building more schools, classrooms, etc.). If, on the other hand, repetition is the problem, then policies should be aimed at improving the quality of teaching rather than building more facilities.

Obtaining a more accurate idea of the magnitude and distribution of repetition in primary schools, in other words, should not be considered as a mere academic exercise.

Taking decisions and establishing priorities in the educational sector, both nationally and internationally, requires reliable data. The allocation of additional resources and the redistribution of existing ones must be assessed in the light of a detailed analysis of the situation and how it is likely to evolve. The public must be given accurate information about the limitations affecting the educational development of each country, while international financial institutions and national educational authorities also need to measure progress and to show results.

Lastly, repetition carries an economic cost. In the case of Latin America, estimates range from at least 1,000 million dollars a year up to as much as 4,200 million (Schiefelbein, 1989; Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993). In South Asia, on the basis of average public expenditure per student and the estimated total number of repetitions, the annual cost could amount to some 800 million dollars, and in East Asia about 1,000 million.

In other words, Latin America and Asia together could be spending some $5,000 million per year on school repetition, a figure which is equivalent to more than double the whole of multilateral assistance to the educational sector for 1990 ($2,395 million, according to UNESCO and UNICEF data).

It may be wondered whether this expenditure is justified and just what it produces in terms of results.

TABLE 2:
Total number of cases of repetition in primary education around 1990 (official figures)

Region	Number of countries	Total number of repetitions
Africa	37	7,759,687
Arab States	10	1,036,110
Asia	12	16,856,167
(China+India)		(10,941,043)
Latin America and the Caribbean	25	10,033,982
(Brazil+Mexico)		(6,349,794)
TOTAL	84	35,685,946
(China, India, Brazil and Mexico)		(17,290,837)

Source: UNESCO, 1993c; UNESCO/UNICEF, 1993.

III. Repetition: a problem or a solution?

It should not be assumed from the regional averages quoted above that repetition is uniformly distributed across all primary school grades, countries or regions.

Generally speaking, the highest rates of repetition tend to be concentrated in the first grade (in several African countries also in the last grade) and, though not exclusively, among children from poor families, living in rural areas or in areas which are backward from a social and educational point of view.

If one considers the gender variable, the few studies available tend to show that there are no significant differences between boys and girls, although further research would be needed. A study on the Arab States, for instance, suggests that the apparent similarities of repetition rates among boys and girls (a little lower among the latter), should be interpreted in the light of the fact that among girls the dropout rate is notably higher than among boys. Although the repetition rates are similar, in actual fact only few girls are given the opportunity to repeat their grade (see Mehran, 1995).

In view of these characteristics, why should repetition even be considered a problem? Some consider repetition to be a solution to the learning problems experienced by some students, who are thus offered the opportunity of extra tuition in order to reach the level of academic performance required to complete their grade. In countries where admission to secondary school depends on highly selective tests, repeating the final grade of primary school may be seen as a means of improving a student's preparation and qualification for the examination.

From this angle, the effects of repetition may be considered positive, since it allows better learning and improved performance, helping students to keep pace with their own physical and intellectual development. This interpretation is fairly widespread in countries which have very selective examination systems for access to secondary education and where the syllabus content of the last primary school grade is relatively difficult.

For instance, a study carried out in Burundi on a sample of some 1,800 pupils in the sixth grade of primary school reached the conclusion that repeating children achieved a better academic performance than non-repeaters, and had been able to take advantage of the extra time to improve their learning and their preparation for entrance tests to secondary school (Schwille et al., 1991).

The analyses which look upon repetition as a positive phenomenon view learning as a linear and repetitive process. Available empirical evidence indicates, however, that the main problems, especially in the early grades of primary school, are related not so much to learning as to teaching, that is, to methods and contents, the criteria used for assessing academic performance and the way schools are managed.

the main problems, especially in the early grades of primary school, are related not so much to learning as to teaching, that is, to methods and contents, the criteria used for assessing academic performance and the way schools are managed

Several studies on this theme have concluded that repetition has little effect where learning is concerned and, from this point of view, seems to be more of an unnecessary expenditure than a worthwhile investment.

In this connection, two aspects are worth bearing in mind. Firstly, there is not always a direct relationship between repetition and learning achievements. A study carried out in rural primary schools in Honduras, for instance, found that 20% of children with sufficient qualifications had not moved on to a higher grade (Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993, p. 26), while in the rural north-eastern part of Brazil it was found that there was no significant relation linking academic performance with promotion to the next grade (ibid., p. 25). A survey made through questionnaires in China showed that 18.6% of repeating children in primary school had

reached a sufficient level of learning (UNESCO, 1992, p. 144). Moreover, it is not always easy to find clear definitions for repetition or well established procedures to regulate it, while the standards used to assess performance are often applied neither systematically nor to all subjects alike. A study carried out in Nepal failed to find any common criteria applied by teachers with respect to promotion (Williams et al., 1993, p. 16). In a study applied to a sample of schools in Namibia, it was found that both the inconsistent application of standards and the individual attitudes and opinions of teachers may influence the decision to fail a student more than the actual level of learning achieved (Fair, 1994).

rural schools.... where the physical infrastructure is inadequate, multigrade classes are given by a single teacher, the time devoted to teaching is often less than that laid down in the school timetable, and the teacher is poorly trained and insufficiently prepared

Secondly, low repetition rates do not necessarily signify high levels of academic performance. In Malaysia, for instance, where an automatic promotion standard is applied and where repetition and dropout have practically been eliminated, an analysis of the tests given in rural primary schools in 1989 showed a 67.7% satisfactory performance in mathematics (compared with 92.5% in urban schools) and 57% in English language (69% in urban schools) (UNESCO, 1992, p. 145). In Jamaica, which applies a system of age promotion resulting in low repetition and dropout rates, the analysis of performance tests given in 1989 showed that 48% of those leaving primary school experienced considerable difficulties understanding what they read (Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993, p. 27).

In fact, unlike what may be assumed, students who repeat or who experience learning difficulties generally receive no special attention from the teacher and turn out to be the least cared for. This was shown, for instance, by a survey carried out in 1981 by the Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka (UNESCO, 1987), as well as by a study based on a sample of students in the first to fifth grades of basic education in Madagascar (Uddin Khan & Berstecher, 1988).

In Sri Lanka as well, it was found that the schools with the highest repetition and dropout rates were also those which had most pupils per teacher, especially in the first grade, and where pupils received the least support from their teachers (Colclough & Lewin, 1993). A survey carried out in rural schools in Mexico showed that teachers generally do not know how to help pupils who experience difficulties learning a particular subject (Ezpeleta & Weiss, 1994). It has also often been observed that teachers have low expectations where repeating children are concerned and tend to devote more time and attention to students who perform better, thus creating a vicious circle which is hard to break.

The highest repetition and dropout rates are concentrated in rural schools. The most common situation is one where the physical infrastructure is inadequate, multi-grade classes are given by a single teacher (one-third of primary schools in India in 1987), the time devoted to teaching is often less than that laid down in the school timetable, and the teacher is poorly trained and insufficiently prepared. In Nicaragua, for instance, a study showed that the risk of repeating is higher when teachers are young and have limited working experience (UNICEF, 1995, p. 22).

On the other hand, repetition has a notable effect on dropout and early school leaving. A study carried out in eighteen communes and cities in the province of Hebei (China) found that 68.6% of dropouts had already repeated a grade. The dropout rate was 21.6% among non-repeaters, 31.6% among those who had repeated once and 82.8% among those who had repeated more than twice (UNESCO, 1992). In the case of Sri Lanka, a survey carried out in the early 1980s showed that 60% of dropouts had

attended school irregularly; 21% had repeated a grade three times, 31% twice and 64% once. In addition, 82% of dropouts were older than the normal age for their grade (UNESCO, 1984).

It is not so much a matter of establishing to what extent repetition induces dropout, but rather of taking account of the fact that a fair proportion of pupils who leave school before completing the primary cycle do so after repeating a grade once or twice, probably without having acquired a satisfactory level of knowledge and skills.

A further effect of high repetition rates is the marked increase in the proportion of pupils who are older than the normal age for their grade. In other words, added to boys and girls who have not been admitted to the education system at the right age, there are the pupils who have had to repeat their grade. This type of situation, which is very common in rural schools in many countries, has at least two significant effects:

(i) The task of teaching is complicated by having to teach children at different levels of physical and psychological maturity. It is well known that teaching materials and educational methods are designed mostly on the basis of an ideal situation with an average student in mind. Such materials are obviously not suitable for teachers faced with the reality of different ages and levels in the classroom (see Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993; Ezpeleta & Weiss, 1994). As a result, children who repeat and who are over age (who, as we have said, usually receive no special attention), find it more difficult to follow the 'normal' pace of teaching and in many cases will have to repeat their grade again.

In this way, repetition may merely lead to yet more repetition instead of better learning. According to some estimates, the probability that a new pupil will be promoted in the first grade in Brazil is almost double that of a repeating child (Costa Ribeiro, 1990, p. 7). On the other hand, as the age of pupils and the number of times they have repeated increases, so does the likelihood that they will leave school for good in a state of virtual illiteracy, especially if they leave before the third grade, as shown by a study carried out in the Philippines (UNESCO, 1984).

(ii) Children repeating the first grade take up many of the places which could have been available for children reaching school age and who should be enrolling for the first time, thus leading to an inefficient use of the premises and resources available.

In countries where there is already sufficient educational capacity to satisfy the whole of the school age population, a considerable proportion of the available capacity is used for repeating pupils, making it more difficult to extend primary education to the whole population.

On the other hand, countries with an insufficient educational coverage and high repetition rates are forced to expand existing capacity too fast and to devote most of their available resources to creating additional places.

Lastly, it is worth noting that higher repetition rates are related to more student-years on average needed to pass a grade and to complete primary school successfully, entailing additional cost and a loss of internal efficiency for the education system. The cost increase could be considered useful if the expected results in terms of better learning were achieved. A great deal of evidence suggests, however, that the opposite is true, at least for the early grades.

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IV. Factors associated with repetition

The enormous expansion of primary education in recent decades has allowed access to the education system to very large social sectors which have traditionally been excluded from schooling. The greater coverage obtained has required considerable investments in terms of premises, equipment and staff, yet has not been accompanied by any substantive review of teaching contents and methods, taking into account the growing differentiation in educational demand and the increasing diversity of students brought into the system. Many attempts have been made at renewing and reforming education, in different regional contexts, but sufficient account has not always been taken of the need for substantial changes in the way basic learning is organized, promoted and assessed. Furthermore, educational practice continues to be anchored to an ideal of linguistic and cultural uniformity which is very far from reflecting the true characteristics of the school population. Instead of being considered as a resource and a starting point, the cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities of students are frequently perceived as an obstacle or a *disadvantage* for the acquisition of further knowledge.

Why is it that a fair proportion of children entering the primary cycle repeat once or twice? Is it plausible that there are so many students who have problems adapting to school and taking full advantage of the opportunity to learn, or is it not more likely that school systems are failing to adapt their educational methods to the diversity of students and continue to have serious difficulties with the quality of the teaching they provide?

The available evidence regarding the factors related to high repetition provide a sufficiently clear idea of the set of variables which may be involved. What is less obvious, on the other hand, and a matter of controversy, is the relative importance which should be attached to each in explaining school performance.

The distinction between out-of-school factors (related to living conditions and the socio-economic environment) and factors internal to the education system (such as teaching resources, teacher training or teaching contents) has been accepted and their complex interrelationship widely recognized. However, the extent to which these factors individually determine such significant disparities in academic performance and exactly how they affect school success and failure is still an open question.

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PHOTO UNICEF/Shoukry Zaky

The association between socio-economic causes and final school dropout is a well documented fact, especially in the case of children over 10 years old, who can begin to be a source of additional income or to lend a hand in domestic or farming work. Moreover, all the studies carried out in different regions agree that the highest repetition and (more generally) school failure rates are observed among students from certain social sectors and geographic areas. There are two different ways of explaining this correlation.

One possibility is that a high repetition rate is an indicator of poor school performance and an insufficient aptitude to learn, due to social conditions of poverty which do not favour normal physical and mental development in children.

Alternatively, it may be argued that repetition is an indicator of the low quality of the educational services supplied to this type of student, characterized by a poor supply of material resources, an inadequate level of preparation on the part of teachers and ineffective teaching methods.

In fact, the available evidence shows that the greater the deprivations as far as living conditions are concerned, the greater the limitations in the teaching available, so that the neediest children almost invariably receive the poorest quality education.

Internal variables of the education system and the quality of teaching have a considerable impact on high repetition rates in the early grades of primary school. Such factors include the teachers, their attitudes, degree of preparation and experience; the teaching methods used and the criteria applied to assess learning; the time devoted to teaching and attendance at school as shown in the cases of Madagascar (Uddin Khan & Berstecher, 1988) and Mexico (Ezpeleta & Weiss, 1994); the quality of the communication they establish with students and the remedial actions with which they try to resolve what they perceive as learning problems. They also include the school, the way it is organized and managed (timetable, evaluation and promotion systems, availability of pre-school care, etc.) and the availability of texts, teaching inputs and possible incentives. They also obviously include the contents of teaching (and in particular the degree of difficulty of programmes) and the extent to which these are adapted to the children's cultural and linguistic characteristics.

the available evidence shows that the greater the deprivations as far as living conditions are concerned, the greater the limitations in the teaching available, so that the neediest children almost invariably receive the poorest quality education

All these variables may be ordered in different ways. There is one aspect, however, which is particularly relevant across different regions, namely the acquisition of reading and writing skills. There are two questions in this respect which need analyzing in detail, repetition in the early grades and multilingualism.

REPETITION IN EARLY GRADES

Available information appears to confirm that the highest repetition rates occur in the first grade of primary school, where learning success is closely related to the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, which also determine the pupils' chances of later progress.

The teaching methods used, the teachers' ability to master them, their suitability in relation to the characteristics of the teaching language and to the pupils' own knowledge of that language all appear as critical factors for the development of the ability to understand and to reproduce written and verbal messages.

In this sense, the effectiveness of teaching generally continues to be very low, and does not help to create the sort of literate environment which is propitious to active learning and to the creative use of reading and writing. Furthermore, in many cases the traditional way of teaching reading and writing tends to be very mechanical

pupils who do not speak the language used in teaching and who are faced with the double difficulty of learning to read and write in an unknown language at the same time as they acquire that language do not receive any special assistance

and encourages memorization rather than the significant use of language to communicate. Schools continue to consider the learning of writing more as the acquisition of a technique than the appropriation of a new object of knowledge, that is to say, a system for representing language. In this sense, the high repetition rates in the early grades of primary school should be interpreted not so much as the effect of the usual difficulties experienced by students as they try to develop a technical skill (which can gradually be overcome with more effective methods and more practice), but rather as a reflection of serious limitations of the education system, which is unable to support the normal development of a means of acquiring new knowledge (see Ferreiro, 1986*a* & *b*; 1988).

It must also be remembered that linguistic diversity is the rule rather than the exception in all geographic regions, and that most of the time teaching is conducted in one language only, which is the official language. Pupils who do not speak the language used in teaching and who are faced with the double difficulty of learning to read and write in an unknown language at the same time as they acquire that language do not receive any special assistance. Similarly, the teachers working in multilingual environments have not been either trained or taught to cope with the difficulties they have to face in practice in such situations. It is worth pointing out that bilingual education programmes reach only a tiny proportion of the school population needing this type of teaching. In China, for instance, about 2.6 million children belonging to the fifty-five recognized *national minorities* are enrolled in primary school, but only little more than a fifth of them enjoy bilingual schooling (Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, 1994, p. 98-99). In Latin America, bilingual education programmes have become widespread only in Mexico, while among the *indigenous populations* of the different countries of the region, repetition, dropout and illiteracy rates are usually twice the national averages (see Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía, 1994; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 1994). In Bolivia, for instance, a primary school child of indigenous origin is twice as likely to repeat a grade compared with a non-indigenous pupil, while in Guatemala repetition rates among

indigenous pupils run as high as 90% (see Patrinos & Psacharopoulos, 1992). In Paraguay, monolingual Guaraní children are more likely to repeat and generally progress more slowly through the system (see Patrinos, Vélez & Psacharopoulos, 1993).

Among the *tribal minorities* in Thailand, the literacy rate is only 16.4%, compared with a national average of 93.3% (Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, p. 112). In Viet Nam, the 1989 census survey estimated a nationwide illiteracy rate of 16.4%, but an average rate of 40.8% among national minorities, which account for around 13% of the population (ibid., p. 115); also in Viet Nam, 1980 data indicated an average dropout rate of 3.8% nationwide in the first four primary grades, while in the provinces populated mostly by national minorities the rate varied between 4.7 and 13% (UNESCO, 1984, p. 169).

MULTILINGUALISM

Language teaching takes up a substantial proportion of available time in primary education (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1992, p. 45). On entering school, children have to learn new uses of the language and have to develop new types of linguistic behaviour, which are not necessarily the same as those of their reference culture.

The extent to which pupils are able to assimilate these new language functions and the degree of familiarity achieved in terms of the linguistic behaviour patterns required have a considerable impact on school performance and its assessment. And yet the approaches and techniques applied in language teaching continue to ignore the advances achieved in the field of child literacy in recent decades. In some bilingual educational projects undertaken in Latin America, it was found when innovative methods of teaching reading and writing were applied, for instance, that the children of indigenous mother tongue had acquired a better knowledge of Spanish than Spanish-speaking students who had been taught by traditional methods.

There is considerable ignorance in the education system regarding language problems and teaching methods related to reading and writing, particularly in multilingual situations. In Latin America, for instance, teachers working in *indigenous* schools are frequently under the impression that they are teaching Spanish when in fact they are using it as a tool to teach other subjects. This confusion between language as either a *means* or an *object* of teaching can significantly delay acquisition of the official language, apart from causing serious difficulties in the learning of curriculum contents.

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From this point of view, the poor educational results achieved in multilingual countries are also related to the lack of appropriate planning of the use of languages in primary education. In recent years, there has been much discussion regarding the advisability of initiating the learning process in a child's own mother tongue, and it seems that broad agreement has been reached in this respect. Yet despite this, innovations introduced in this field in recent decades have not managed to get beyond the experimental stage, and bilingual education is still considered as a luxury rather than a necessity (on Latin America, see UNESCO, 1990). Moreover, the need for a suitable methodology for teaching the official language as a second language has been given very little attention in educational policies and in the research and investment programmes of international organizations (Torres, 1995*a* & *b*).

V. Social attitudes towards repetition

In general, the *culture of repetition* or *pedagogy of repetition,* as defined by some authors (see Costa Ribeiro, 1990), is accepted as a normal fact of primary education, on the assumption that repetition is a remedy provided by the education system to offset a lack of learning, for reasons either internal or external to the school system. From the point of view of families and pupils, especially among the poorest social sectors, who have to make considerable efforts to obtain access to education, it is preferable to repeat a grade than to have to face greater difficulties with more complex curricular content. In the last resort, it is better to repeat than to receive no teaching at all (see Myers, 1993; McGinn et al., 1992).

Views tend to differ regarding the causes of poor learning standards according to the positions of those involved in the system. Teachers, school principals and educational authorities alike tend to relate the learning difficulties and low academic performance of pupils chiefly to factors external to the system, such as low family income and poor living conditions, which give rise to low learning aptitudes and little interest in schooling, or the inadequate support which children receive from their families. They also commonly refer to the material limitations inherent in the system, such as the lack of equipment, textbooks and teaching inputs. Few consider that repetition really depends on

From the point of view of families and pupils . . . in the last resort, it is better to repeat than to receive no teaching at all

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the quality of the teaching offered or the criteria used to evaluate learning.

A study concerning a small sample of primary schools in Brazil showed that the teachers interviewed appeared convinced that children from low-income social backgrounds faced inherent learning difficulties, although direct observation showed that the highest repetition rates were related to first grade teachers lacking in enthusiasm, dedication and suitable training (Davico, 1990).

While the socio-economic level of pupils obviously affects their academic performance and the qualifications they obtain, it also influences the expectation teachers have regarding their learning capacity. A survey carried out in some primary schools in Namibia showed that teachers' attitudes and opinions concerning aspects of their students not directly related to education considerably influenced the decision whether to promote a pupil or not (Fair, 1994).

Parents, on the other hand, tend to attribute low learning performance to their children's own limitations and shortcomings, without ever querying the efficiency or quality of the schooling provided. In this way, the low expectations in terms of learning for students from the poorest families may originate on either the demand side (parents) or on the supply side (teachers) of education, each serving to reinforce the other (Tedesco, 1983).

A better awareness of the social attitudes towards educational results, of the different approaches to academic performance and the different reactions among families to their children's failure in school might well contribute to a better understanding of the problem.

Further studies and research, and even more so exchanges of views regarding the results obtained between families, teachers and educational authorities, might provide some useful clues for the definition and implementation of strategies for dealing with repetition.

The measures adopted should probably include information campaigns aimed at changing deep-rooted convictions and widespread social opinions regarding school repetition.

A practical example may illustrate this point. It is well established that bilingual education programmes often meet with resistance from parents, teachers and officials alike, who are convinced that the teaching of the mother tongue hampers or retards the acquisition of a second language (the official language). Assessments of bilingual education projects carried out in Latin America have shown that there are no significant differences in the standards achieved in the official language between pupils receiving bilingual education and those taught along traditional lines (see, for instance, López, 1995). In other words, the development of language skills in the mother tongue — far from restricting the learning of a second language — tends to facilitate the process. Once again, widely accepted social attitudes and beliefs have hampered the introduction of innovative methods which have proved to be pedagogically effective. Changes in the school system and culture should therefore be treated like any other attempt at planned social change, the success of which will depend to a great extent on how much is known about the different points of view and practices of the social players involved.

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VI. Various strategies to overcome repetition

According to the available evidence analyzed in this study, it may be suggested that high repetition rates in the early grades of primary school are to a large extent due to the low quality of the education supply and to problems of organizing and assessing basic learning.

As was mentioned earlier, many factors affect repetition, in ways which vary according to individual situations. Measures have been taken and experiments have been tried in many countries and various regions in an effort to solve or to alleviate the problem through improvements in the effectiveness of teaching. It must be remembered, however, that measures which have been successful in one country may not necessarily have the same impact in another. In actual fact, the possibilities of classifying and comparing similar experiments in different regions of the world are fairly limited.

the problem is concentrated in particular grades of primary education, in some regions of a country more than in others and, though not exclusively, among the children of poor families and indigenous communities

In view of the complexity of the problem and the sheer diversity of national situations, is it even worth trying to identify the most appropriate strategies and actions to reduce repetition and achieve better learning? Several studies on the subject of repetition problems (including, for instance, UNESCO, 1984; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1992) have reached the conclusion that, on the basis of the information currently available, it is extremely difficult to determine which measures offer the best guarantees of success.

There are some general aspects, however, which may come in useful in trying to define strategies for tackling repetition.

COMPREHENSIVE MEASURES AND SUSTAINED EFFORT

Firstly, strategies have to be comprehensive and sustained over time. Two Latin American countries (Chile and Uruguay) have managed to reduce repetition in primary school considerably, thanks to teacher training, the distribution of texts, curriculum improvements and incentives for both teachers and students (see Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993, p. 32).

'MAPPING' REPETITION

Reports suggest that the problem is concentrated in particular grades of primary education, in some regions of a country more than in others and, though not exclusively, among the children of poor families and indigenous communities. In view of this, defining strategies requires preparing a map of repetition, taking account of the different levels and related problems (the causes and effects of repetition may differ, depending on whether the first or last grades of the primary cycle are considered), and the groups needing priority attention.

ESTIMATING COSTS AND IMPROVING EFFICIENCY

While reducing repetition rates may ensure significant savings in terms of average expenditure per student, the additional investments required to make the strategies operational will also need to be considered. This would mean estimating the costs of specific actions, the possible alternatives for a better distribution of available resources and their potential effectiveness. The use of simulation models establishing relationships between repetition factors in each grade and according to priority groups would no doubt facilitate decisions and the definition of specific programmes, since it would provide a means of measuring the impact and the cost of possible solutions in each scenario.

DEFINING PRIORITIES

Lastly, while a set of integrated measures will need to be planned for, there is probably no need and even no possibility of trying to resolve all existing problems at once. Perhaps the most important aspect

is that the efforts deployed to increase the internal efficiency of the education system should focus on countering the causes of low performance in primary school.

To sum up, strategies may be aimed at two general objectives: (a) improving the material conditions in which teaching takes place, in order to provide a suitable environment for learning and to offset any drawbacks children bring with them to school (in terms of premises, equipment, teaching materials, incentives, pre-school education, etc.); and (b) improving the teaching-learning process, in order to ensure that pupils fully develop their potential (with properly trained teachers, suitable teaching methods, a different approach to organization and to assessing learning, etc.).

FOOD PROGRAMMES AND DISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATIONAL EQUIPMENT

Many surveys have highlighted the positive effects of food programmes and the distribution of school equipment and aids on reducing dropout, as well as increasing assistance to classes, especially in the cases of the children of low-income families (Ezpeleta & Weiss, 1994; McGinn et al., 1992; Gargiulo & Crouch, 1994; UNICEF, 1995). Nevertheless, merely spending more time in school does not necessarily imply a better learning performance. Food programmes should be accompanied by measures to improve teaching efficiency as well.

MORE AND BETTER SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Many studies have shown that supplying more and better textbooks has a positive effect on school performance (see, for instance, Colclough & Lewin, 1993; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1992; Thiagarajan & Pasigna, 1988), even though, like attendance at school, the greater availability of texts in itself will not resolve the problem of their appropriate use and is not a guarantee that teaching methods will be improved. A greater availability of school textbooks and reading material is a necessary though not sufficient condition for a renewal of the teaching process.

INITIAL AND PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

There is evidence which suggests a positive correlation between pre-school and initial education and greater success in learning, especially if combined with food programmes (see Lockheed & Verspoor, 1992; Myers, 1992; Myers & King, 1983; Reimers, 1993). In Mexico, a positive impact was observed especially among the children of poor families, and it was estimated, for instance, that pre-school education produces a 19% improvement in the results of mathematics tests among the children of illiterate parents, compared with an improvement of only 1% in the case of better educated parents (Palafox et al., 1994, p. 177-78).

Despite the considerable expansion of pre-school education in recent years, there is a tendency for services in general to be concentrated in urban areas, where the beneficiaries are mostly children in the medium to upper social strata. If so, strategies for achieving a greater coverage of pre-school education should give priority to the more needy and vulnerable population groups.

IMPROVING TEACHING

Generally speaking, it may be said that measures aimed at improving the preparation of children for learning and at facilitating their admission and attendance at school are more likely to succeed if they are related to other measures for improving the quality of teaching.

In this respect, one should stress the

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LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

In Myanmar, there are estimated to be 135 language groups; in Indonesia, there are some 350 local languages, and in Papua New Guinea about 600. In India, there are an estimated 1,200 languages: in the state of Manipur, for instance, 26 languages are spoken, while the state of Nagaland has 16 official languages, some with their own system of writing (Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, 1994). In Latin America, about 400 languages are spoken, and linguistic diversity in Africa is frequently associated with a type of social organization where ethnic bonds play a very important role.

need for measures aimed at strengthening initial education programmes and at introducing basic changes in the way reading and writing are taught.

Available evidence concerning infant, initial and pre-school education have shown the significant impact on learning capacity and motivation produced by all measures aimed at a balanced physical and mental development, especially among children from underprivileged backgrounds (see World Bank, 1995*a*, p. 46-47). Pupils who have to repeat as a result of some type of physical disability could be assisted for a reasonable cost by means of special education programmes (see World Bank, 1995*a*, p. 80).

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE TEACHING OF READING AND WRITING

Moreover, in view of the obvious connection between repetition in the first grade of primary education and the learning of reading and writing, there is a need for a thorough overhaul of the parameters and traditional practices applied in the school system with regard to literacy (see the works of Ferreiro quoted in the bibliography).

GREATER AWARENESS OF CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

The impact of cultural and linguistic factors on school performance generally tends to be underestimated, despite the observation that in many cultures the standards of socialization and access to knowledge are not in harmony with the teaching methods and learning styles found in the school system.

As regards the language aspect, there is broad agreement regarding the advisability of using children's mother tongue in addition to the official language in the early grades of primary school.

It is true that in most developing countries the situation as regards languages tends to be extremely complex.

Moreover, a considerable number of unofficial languages, which have only recently acquired writing systems, tend to suffer a high level of dialectal fragmentation and attempts at standardization have only just begun. Designing bilingual education programmes requires additional resources which are not always available, proper technical advice, sufficient time devoted to experimentation and research, and careful planning of the use of languages. A sectoral mission of the World Bank carried out in 1993 in the province of Baluchistan (Pakistan) found that an attempt to produce teaching materials in the four official languages, without any advice or linguistic planning, had been unsuccessful, which is why it was decided to use only a single official language in written material.

The responses of the education system to linguistic and cultural diversity have almost invariably been inadequate. Any

efforts to apply a uniform, standardizing model have paradoxically tended to exclude rather than to integrate.

What strategies should then be considered in highly differentiated language contexts?

Learning in the mother tongue is a right, and any decisions in that respect therefore extend beyond the school environment and carry a strong political connotation.

Nevertheless, assessments made of bilingual educational experiments in Latin America have shown that using the mother tongue in primary education contributes towards better learning in several areas of the curriculum and to developing a reading ability in a second language; it offers better possibilities of academic success for children who are generally underprivileged; it facilitates greater participation by pupils in the classroom and generates a more dynamic relationship between the school and the community; it tends to improve enrolment and promotion rates; and has a favourable impact on dropout and repetition (see López, 1995; World Bank, 1995*b*).

At the same time, the possibility of acquiring a language which allows broader social communication and access to other knowledge and learning of a more universal nature may also be considered a right, even though in many cases it is felt to be an imposition. This would indicate a need to consider, as part of the strategies for improving teaching in multilingual contexts, a much broader approach to the way languages are used in education.

To sum up, improving methods of teaching reading and writing, the mother tongue and the official language as a second language appears to be a basic area for further action, in situations of both low and high linguistic differentiation, if what is at stake is improving learning and reducing repetition.

PROMOTION AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The criteria used for promotion and for the assessment of learning in primary education deserves specific mention. Annual promotion does not appear necessarily to produce positive effects in terms of learning and may on the other hand discourage pupils, increasing dropouts and maintaining high repetition rates (for the case of Asia, see UNESCO, 1984). *Automatic promotion* appears to be the simplest way of reducing repetition and the most advantageous in terms of costs, since reducing the average time required to progress through the system means that more children can be catered for. However, unless appropriate measures are taken to help students who have difficulties and unless learning objectives are reformulated and placed within the reach of the majority of pupils, it is most likely that the effect will be negative (see Colclough & Lewin, 1993; Schwille et al., 1991; UNESCO Office of Statistics, 1984) or that it may only serve to defer the problem to the end of the primary school cycle.

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Some Latin American countries (including Panama and Puerto Rico) decided to do away with automatic promotion when they found that more children were leaving primary school with an unsatisfactory standard of learning which was attributed to the lower quality of education brought about by the new measure (see McGinn et al., 1992; Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1993). It is also by no means sure that eliminating failure will produce significant effects on repetition and the flow of students, as has been observed in Brazil (Klein & Ribeiro, 1993) and Colombia (Colclough & Lewin, 1993).

It may further be pointed out that learning assessment is often used more for selection purposes than as a tool to assist learning and to identify difficulties experienced by stu-

dents. Such assessment is rarely understood as a permanent process and is frequently concentrated on only a few subjects of the curriculum (Macintosh, 1994). Moreover, in view of the great linguistic and cultural diversity in many countries, it would be worth considering what cultural standards should be used to assess students, how their progress in acquiring reading and writing abilities is measured and in what languages.

Studies show that reading and writing are ideal criteria for assessing and promoting students. In both Latin America and Asia, some interesting experiments have been made in the area of flexible instruction, by doing away with grades and allowing students to progress at their own pace, encouraging the ablest with appropriate materials and providing special support for those experiencing most difficulties, eliminating annual tests and encouraging instead methods of self-assessment and self-learning (Schiefelbein, 1992; UNESCO, 1984). In these cases, although there is some evidence of improvement in academic performance and in the dropout rate, the same cannot be said of repetition, as was found in an evaluation of the *Escuela Nueva* programme carried out in Colombia in 1987 (see Colclough & Lewin, 1993, p. 137).

the persistence of high rates of repetition in the early grades of primary school is contradictory in an education system which claims to satisfy the basic learning needs of the whole population

TEACHER TRAINING AND PREPARATION

Reducing repetition implies in any case introducing substantial changes in the styles of learning and above all in the didactic approach and the role of the teacher. Apart from obvious requirements in terms of preparation and the development of appropriate materials, such changes imply a full review of teacher training. In the medium and longer term, careful attention should be given to the need to innovate in the area of training educational staff, which in many cases appears bound to traditional and outdated approaches and which necessitates frequent retraining (see Torres, 1995*a*).

IMPROVING STATISTICS

Lastly, it would be essential to improve methods of collecting statistical information and analyzing the relevant data. An effort should be made to arrive at more operational and more homogeneous definitions of the different types of repetition and related factors, by identifying suitable indicators to check how relevant repetition is as a factor, to monitor its development and to establish comparisons. Field studies are crucial for obtaining a better grasp of the problems, and especially to support information and dissemination campaigns aimed at changing social attitudes towards repetition.

The persistence of high rates of repetition in the early grades of primary school is contradictory in an education system which claims to satisfy the basic learning needs of the whole population, unless a high repetition rate is considered as an indicator of how far the system still is at present from the ultimate goal.

Satisfying basic learning needs implies a number of challenges and opens up new perspectives for primary education. It implies essentially redefining schooling and promoting a new school model on the basis of which good quality education can be guaranteed for everyone. In the end, if the message left by the Jomtien World Conference may be interpreted as the conviction that all can learn — and often manage to *despite* the shortcomings of the education offered — how is it possible that so many students have to repeat their grades?

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He has served and continues to serve on numerous boards, including: the Executive Board of UNESCO; the Board and the Executive Committee of the International Development Research Centre of Canada; International Institute for Educational Planning; member and the First President of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa; the Association of African Universities and its Executive Committee; the Council of the United Nations University; the International Council for Educational Development; and Board of Visitors for the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh; and Board member of the Educational Development Centre. He is a Distinguished Fellow of the Academy for Educational Development.

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Ruben Klein (Brazil) is researcher at the Laboratório Nacional de Computação Científica (LNCC), Rio de Janeiro, where he deals with statistics, educational indicators, school repetition problems, large-scale assessment of basic education and item response theory. He holds a Ph.D. in mathematics (1974) from the Massachussetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Cambridge, United States of America. Among his recent publications are: R. Klein & S.Costa Ribeiro, O fluxo dos alunos do 1° grau no estado do Paraná na década de 1980 [The flow of pupils in the first grade in the state of Paraná during the 1980s], *Relatório de pesquisa e desenvolvimento* (LNCC/CNPq), 1993, n° 29; R. Klein, (1994). O fluxo dos alunos do 1° grau no estado do Rio de Janeiro na década de 80: necessidade de melhorar a qualidade do ensino [The flow of pupils in the grade in the state of Rio de Janeiro during the 1980s: the need to improve the quality of education]. *Revista Rio de Janeiro,* (UERJ), ano II, n° 3, p. 9-20. R. Klein, *Produção e utilizacão de indicadores educacionais* [Production and use of educational indicators], 1995, 2ª versão (mimeo) presented at the Workshop on Repetition, Geneva, February 1995.

Abel Koulaninga (Central African Republic) is at present Secretary-General of the Commission of the Central African Republic for UNESCO. In 1987 he obtained a Ph.D. in educational sciences from the René Descartes University, Paris. After his studies, from 1987 he was Director-General of Teaching and Training in the Central African Ministry of Education, before entering his present post in 1990. Mr Koulaninga is a member, among other functions, of the Office of Future Research, Studies and Training in the Central African Republic and World President of the International Commission on Measures to Encourage the Promotion, Development and Protection of the Cultural heritage. Among his recent publications are: *La Situation de l'intégration socio-éducative des Pygmées en Afrique Centrale* [The situation of social and educational integration of Pygmies in Central Africa] (1995); *Etude sur la problématique de l'introduction du Sango (langue nationale) dans le système éducatif centrofricain* [Study on the question of introducing Sango (the national language) in the Central African education system] (1992); *Etude en vue d'identifier les facteurs influençant l'accès des filles à l'école et l'amélioration de leur performance en République Centrafricaine* [Study to identify factors affecting the access of girls to school and improving their performance in the Central African Republic] (1992); *Suivi de l'Education pour Tous : analyse de la situation et stratégies en République Centrafricaine* [Follow-up to Education for All: analysis of the situation and strategies in the Central African Republic] 1991; *Ecole fondamentale rurale* [The basic rural school] (1991).

Luis E. López (Peru) is a Peruvian linguist, specialized in socio-linguistics applied to the development of intercultural bilingual education programmes. He has recently joined the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ) as Principal Adviser for the Andean Regional Intercultural Bilingual Education Human Resource Development Programme, based in Bolivia at the University of San Simón. Before that, he had been working for three years as General Advisor to the Bolivian Educational Reform. For the past decade, Mr López has been involved in various educational innovations carried out in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru, as well as in educational evaluation and research carried out in some of these countries, and has also worked as a consultant for UNESCO, UNICEF, GTZ, SIDA, Terra Nuova and the World Bank. Apart from numerous articles published in specialized journals and in collective works, both in Latin America and in the United States and Europe, Mr López has produced various books on bilingual education in indigenous America, amongst which are: *Las lenguas en la educación bilingüe: el caso de Puno* [Languages in bilingual education: the case of the Puno], *La educación indígena en América Latina* [Indigenous education in Latin America] and *Aprendizaje y enseñanza de Castellano como segunda lenguo* [Learning and teaching in Spanish as a second language] published in Guatemala. He has recently contributed to a volume on indigenous literacies in the Americas to be published by Mouton in 1996 with a detailed article on the educational experience of the Bolivian Guaranís, and is now working on a contribution for the *Encyclopaedia of language and education* to be published by Kluwer in the Netherlands and on a chapter on bilingualism in South America for a book about a global perspective on bilingualism being prepared in Canada.

Victor M. Ordoñez (Philippines) is the Director of the UNESCO Bangkok Office. As such, he is responsible for co-ordinating this office's efforts in the areas of education, culture, communications and social science throughout the forty-one countries of the Asia and Pacific region, as well as serving as the official representative of UNESCO and its Director-General in Thailand, Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Ordoñez comes directly from

Who contributed to this document?

UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, where he served since 1990 as the Principal Director of the Basic Education Division and the Co-ordinator of programmes and inter-agency efforts in the 'Education for All' initiatives following the Jomtien Conference (1990).

Prior to joining UNESCO, Mr Ordoñez served as Deputy Minister and Under-secretary in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports of the Philippines, and had served in other key government positions in the Ministries of Trade and of Governmental Re-organization in that country. He has served as academic dean, planning director, graduate school dean, college president and board chairman of various academic institutions in the Philippines. He was also a professorial lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a research fellow at the East-West Center, Hawaii. Mr Ordoñez holds seven academic degrees, with honours, including a Ph.D. in oriental philosophy, and pursued post-doctoral studies in management at the University of Wisconsin, Harvard University and the Asian Institute of Management.

Ernesto Schiefelbein (Chile) is the Director of the UNESCO Regional Office of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean. He received an Ed.D. from Harvard University in 1970 and in 1960 completed degrees in teaching from the Universidad Técnica, and in economics from the University of Chile. A former Minister of Education in Chile, he has been a visiting professor at Harvard University and Director of the First Spanish Course in Preparation of Education Projects organized by the Economic Development Institute (EDI) of the World Bank. Dr. Schiefelbein has obtained several national and international awards and is a member of four editorial boards of professional journals. Among the books which he has published (alone or as co-author) are: *Eight years of their lives* (1982); *Repetition: the key issue in Latin America* (1989); *The state of education in LAC, 1980–1989* (1992); *Improving the quality of primary education in Latin America and the Caribbean* (1994); and *Uno nueva oportunidad: el rol de la educación en el desarrollo de América Latina* [A new opportunity: the role of education in developing Latin America] (1995).

Juan Carlos Tedesco (Argentina) graduated in Educational Sciences (Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of Buenos Aires, 1968). He was Professor of History of Education at the Universities of La Plata, Comahue and La Pampa, where he also held the post of academic secretary. In 1976, he joined UNESCO as specialist in educational policy for the UNESCO/CEPAL Project 'Development and Education in Latin America and the Caribbean', where he was in charge of research on education and employment. From 1982 to 1986, he was Director of CRESALC (Centro Regional de Educación Superior para América Latina y el Caribe). In 1986, he was appointed Director of the Regional Office for Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO-OREALC) and is currently Director of UNESCO's International Bureau for Education in Geneva.

He has published many articles and books on relations between education and society. These include: *Educoción, sociedad en Argentino:* 1800–1945 [Education and society in Argentina, 1800–1945] (1972); *El Proyecto Educativo Autoritario: Argentino 1976–82* [The Imposed Educational Project: 1976–82] (1983); *Una nueva oportunidod. El rol de lo educación en el desarrollo de América Lotina* [A new opportunity: the role of education in developing Latin America] (1995) (with E. Schiefelbein); *El nuevo pacto educativo* [The new educational pact] (1995).

Luis Tiburcio (Portugal) has been a UNESCO Programme Specialist in the field of educational policies and planning since 1982. Specializing in policy analysis and the economics of education, he has been involved in a wide range of technical co-operation activities in African and Latin American countries. At present, he is Representative and Head of the UNESCO Office in Maputo, Mozambique. He has written numerous articles and has participated in various publications dealing with educational development issues. He is co-author, with F. Reimers, of the UNESCO publication *Education, adjustment and reconstruction: options for change* (1993) (also published in French and Spanish).

Rosa María Torres del Castillo (Ecuador). Educationalist, linguist and educational journalist. Her research, technical consultancy and headquarters communication work has specialized in several areas related to the basic education of children and adults. She was professor of languages and linguistics at the Universidad Católica and the Universidad Central in Quito (1971–78). From 1981 to 1986, she worked in Nicaragua, basically in the area of adult education promoted during the Sandinist period. She was Educational Director of the 'Monseñor Leonidas Proaño' Literacy Campaign in Ecuador (1988–91). She has acted as consultant for various international organizations. Since 1992, she has worked as Educational Advisor at UNICEF headquarters in New York, at the same time editing the UNICEF bulletin *Education news*. Since 1990 she has produced a weekly page on Education in the Quito daily *El comercio*. Her experience in the area of information/communication has included newsletters, journals, video productions and radio programmes on the subject of education. She has written many publications on education and communication, several of which have been translated into other languages.

Areerat Wattanasin (Thailand), is the Director of the Curriculum Development Centre, Bangkok. Her main interests are in research and development on appropriate instructional innovation for teaching/learning in local situations. The Curriculum Development Centre is responsible for: (i) developing curriculum and educational innovations, which includes developing programmes for learners at the elementary, secondary and vocational training level, and also short courses programmes; (ii) promoting the implementation of the curriculum. This function deals with creating instructional materials for teacher and educators that are relevant to the conditions and needs of the communities and also providing documents for reinforcing knowledge on the learning process. The Centre also provides instructional innovation manuscripts for communities in order to apply the knowledge and disseminate them to the local schools; (iii) providing training programmes, holding seminars or meetings for concerned personnel. This type of activity can be a seminar for administrators to stimulate their awareness of curriculum development and to be responsive to the needs of the community, or it can be a training programme for local staff enabling them to make the best use of local resources for curriculum development; (iv) monitoring and evaluating the curriculum implementation. Mrs Wattanasin holds a B.Ed. (Math.) and a M.Ed. (Research) from Chulalongkorn University. Among her publications are: *Elementary curriculum* (1978); *Elementary curriculum (revised)* (1990); *Secondary curriculum* (1978); *Secondary curriculum (revised)* (1990); *English subject curriculum* (1996); *Teachers' guide in career education;* and *Teachers' guide in career education management.*

TABLE 3:
Primary education: total number and percentage of repeaters (countries with more than 100,000 repeaters)

Country	Year	Sex	Total number	Total percentage of repeaters
AFRICA				
Algeria	1992	MF	403 987	9
		F	136 324	7
Angola	1990	MF	331 183	33
Benin	1991	MF	123 654	23
		F	42 853	24
Burundi	1992	MF	154 244	24
		F	68 124	23
Cameroon	1990	MF	573 163	29
		F	252 562	28
Central African Republic	1989	MF	101 030	31
		F	40 224	32
Chad	1990	MF	169 600	32
		F	54 800	34
Congo	1993	MF	180 397	36
		F	84 196	35
Côte d'Ivoire	1993	MF	394 756	25
		F	162 219	25
Egypt	1993	MF	400 000	5
		F	151 000	4
Ethiopia	1988	MF	260 286	9
		F	119 709	11
Guinea	1993	MF	103 099	22
		F	37 548	24
Madagascar	1993	MF	487 162	32
		F	229 948	31
Malawi	1992	MF	329 872	18
		F	154 557	18
Mali	1993	MF	126 140	25
		F	48 093	25
Morocco	1992	MF	338 732	12
		F	115 985	10
Mozambique	1993	MF	316 075	26
		F	137 806	26
Rwanda	1991	MF	156 105	14
		F	74 635	14
Senegal	1991	MF	116 730	16
		F	49 286	16
South Africa	1991	MF	889 693	12
		F	382 950	11
Togo	1993	MF	304 742	46
		F	122 630	46
Tunisia	1993	MF	263 052	18
		F	111 010	16
Uganda	1986	MF	310 196	14
		F	138 545	14
United Republic of Tanzania	1993	MF	115 189	3
		F	58 692	3
Zaire	1993	MF	1 035 303	21
		F	438 792	21
AMERICA, NORTH				
Dominican Republic	1987	MF	176 562	17
Guatemala	1985	MF	133 088	13
Honduras	1993	MF	116 159	12
		F	52 018	11
Mexico	1993	MF	1 046 363	7
Nicaragua	1993	MF	125 313	17
		F	58 069	16
AMERICA, SOUTH				
Brazil	1992	MF	5 244 249	17
Colombia	1993	MF	336 103	7
		F	156 537	7
Ecuador	1987	MF	112 415	6
		F	50 848	6
Peru	1985	MF	524 270	14
Venezuela	1992	MF	478 835	11
		F	194 095	9
ASIA				
Bangladesh	1989	MF	770 376	7
China	1993	MF	4 645 000	4
India	1987	MF	3 682 988	4
		F	1 461 275	4
Indonesia	1992	MF	2 659 501	9
Iran, Islamic Republic of	1993	MF	708 504	7
		F	266 386	6
Iraq	1992	MF	470 687	16
		F	172 110	13
Lao People's Democratic Repub.	1993	MF	178 524	26
		F	73 197	25
Nepal	1992	MF	807 056	8
		F	280 175	7
Philippines	1989	MF	206 178	2
Saudi Arabia	1992	MF	222 130	11
		F	77 067	8
Sri Lanka	1992	MF	145 305	7
		F	57 238	6
Syrian Arab Repub.	1993	MF	184 584	7
		F	73 560	6
Thailand	1988	MF	227 085	3
Turkey	1992	MF	383 961	6
		F	188 289	6
EUROPE				
Belgium	1990	MF	113 985	17
		F	50 492	15
France	1991	MF	168 968	4
Portugal	1990	MF	145 908	14
		F	50 848	12
Russian Federation	1994	MF	147 000	2
		F	73 000	2
Spain	1989	MF	112 598	5
		F	46 733	4

Source: UNESCO. *Statistiscal yearbook '95*. Paris; Lanham, MD, UNESCO: Bernam. (Table 3.6)

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