

Education Reform in Latin America: Equal Educational Opportunity?

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Abstract/Resumen

This article discusses the general developments and challenges of Latin American public education systems from the 1970s to the late 90s. A framework using 5 stages of equal educational opportunity is used to organize the findings. Connections are made between the student population's levels of access to quality with their future earning potential.

Este artículo presenta los desarrollos generales y los desafíos de los sistemas de educación pública latinoamericanos desde los años 1970 hasta finales de los años 90. Se utiliza un marco de 5 etapas de oportunidades equitativas de la educación para organizar los hallazgos. Se hacen conexiones entre los niveles de acceso a la calidad con el potencial económico de ingresos de poblaciones de estudiantes.

Keywords/Palabras claves: education reform, inequality, economic, Latin America, equal opportunity; reforma educativa, desigualdad, económico, América Latina, oportunidad equitativa

Introduction

Since the turn of the 20th century, North, Central and South America have made great strides in the way education has been conceived, organized and delivered. However, the pace of change in contemporary societies continues to accelerate, creating ever-evolving needs that should be addressed through public education systems. What constituted basic literacy in the past is now insufficient for competent participation in the postmodern world. The bar for achieving certain basic levels of education in today's democratic states keeps being raised in order for governments to have a competent citizenry, able to negotiate and have control over its domestic and international political and economic systems. The role of education then is more critical now than ever for unleashing Latin America's rich human potential. Fernando Reimers, from the Harvard Institute for International Development makes a strong case that in our modern knowledge-based economy, globalization is deepening the divide of social stratification and is producing a kind of social exclusion for millions of Latin Americans (2000b). This phenomenon will become compounded both within and across countries as national economies come to depend more heavily on each other in the context of globalization.

Since 1974, most Latin American countries have implemented reforms in their educational systems. One of the greatest achievements of these past 3 decades has been that most citizens now have access to public schooling. Yet, even as basic education is now available on an unprecedented scale for the majority of Americans, the quality of the services being delivered has become more varied. Likewise, the results of educational achievement for millions of schoolchildren are inconsistent. It has been argued that until students from all socio-economic levels achieve on par, equality of educational opportunity will not be reached (Howe, 2000). This means that unless students who are graduating from school systems can compete on even ground, their chances for gaining desirable employment will be limited, as well as their chances for an adequate income, economic and political power. Have educational reforms helped to change this situation? As John Keynes's famous quote states: "The difficulty lies not so much in the developing of new ideas as in escaping from old ones" (Schugurensky as cited in Howe, 2000, p. 51).

This article discusses the general commitments and achievements of the education sector of various Latin American countries from the 1970s to the late 1990s. Reimer's (2000a) framework of educational opportunity is used to organize the data in order to answer the question of whether educational initiatives over the recent 3 decades in Latin America have had an effect on equality of opportunity for the majority of citizens.

Historical Development of Public Education Prior to the 1950s

Ever since Horace Mann presided over the opening of the first United States (US) public school in 1839, the idea that all citizens should be educated has been debated but largely accepted throughout the Americas (Cremin, 1957). In 1847, Domingo Sarmiento, a well respected Argentinean writer and educator, met Horace Mann and spent 2 days in intense dialogue with him (Moure, 2001). This 2-day meeting sowed the seeds for the establishment of public education in Argentina after Sarmiento became president in 1868. This educational vanguard began building teacher colleges and schools (among other institutions) in Argentina, but also spent time in Chile and Paraguay influencing policy for the establishing of public education in those countries. Just as Mann had influenced Sarmiento, the Uruguayan sociologist and politician José Pedro Varela met Sarmiento and the torch was passed.

Even though public education had already begun in Uruguay by 1820, Varela promoted the principles of free public education and helped to firmly establish the system before his death in 1879 (Spinak, 1977). Forty years later, José Vasconcelos significantly expanded public education in Mexico. Other countries such as Costa Rica and Venezuela soon followed suit. Furthermore, as part of the socialist movement, Cuba established public education, and in the early 70s, Juan Alvarado Velasco reformed education in Peru (Reimers, 2000b).

Since the turn of the 20th century, the idea that all citizens should have equal opportunity to free public education became a priority in the Americas. The aftermath of World War II contained the seeds for the establishment of various worldwide conferences and commissions designed to recreate systems of education throughout United Nations member countries. Their aim was to promote peace on a global scale. In 1945, the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded; and in 1948 it recommended that its then 37 member countries make “free primary education compulsory and universal” (UNESCO, 2004a). In Latin America, the Organization of American States (OAS) pronounced a similar statement that year (UNESCO, 2004d).

Concurrently, the United Nations issued its Universal Declaration of Human Rights the same year, announcing in Article 26:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (United Nations, 1948)

By the close of the mid 1900s, most of the countries in Latin America had committed themselves to increasing coverage to the majority of their nation's youth and establishing public education systems.

Public Education in the Americas after the 1950s

In response to their growing recognition that the models used since the 50s were not working, Latin American governments made an effort to expand their educational systems to provide universal access at the elementary level. Most systems were still characterized by low expenditure per student and low efficiency in the system of delivery which led to high drop-out rates (Brunner, 2001). Secondary and higher education systems were simultaneously developed, but to a much lesser extent because there was less access (Reimers, 2000a). There tended to be a much higher expenditure per student in tertiary education, but with low entrance rates and low levels of participation (Brunner, 2001).

At the same time that educational systems were working to expand access to as many students as possible, debates emerged around the idea that *equality of education* was something quite different from *equitable education*. Could all children truly be dealt with through the same program and similar results be achieved? If not, why was it that some children responded better than others to the same educational programs? Metaphorically, once all were invited to the same banquet, why was it that some were more nourished?

What factors contribute to or block true equality of opportunity in education? In the early 1950s, researchers, practitioners and policymakers explored this issue both in the US and Latin America. They created new initiatives (in the form of compensatory programs) for combating discriminatory practices. Discrimination was noticeable in that few students were enjoying what education had to offer while the masses were left with inadequate human and physical resources. Such actions and new programs allowed educators to form a new body of research that would later be used in policy decisions both within the US and throughout Latin America. Reimers (2000a) identifies three strands of research which probed into the following:

1. The relationship between social inequality and resultant educational inequality.
2. Educational change for improving schools.
3. The criteria for identifying effective schools.

The outcome of such research has led to many new policies and programs in Latin America. To address fundamental social inequity leading to educational inequity, educators have developed new practices in subfields such as *critical* or *liberatory pedagogy*. Some also use the term *transformative pedagogy* because emphasis is placed on changing the basic educational structure in order to most fully develop growth for the least advantaged students in a society. Policymakers have responded to this reality by creating compensatory programs aimed specifically at students most at risk of failing due to historical, current, geographical, racial, linguistic or economic discrimination (Torres, 2000).

Spurred by new technologies, social movements and economic realities, changes in conceptions of schooling began to emerge throughout the Americas in the 60s and 70s. Researchers began to study the idea of *change*. In education, some researchers began to apply the *systems theory* as it related to change in institutions. Other educational researchers began exploring what made some schools operate more successfully than others (Slavin, 1994). Apparently, these researchers were not interested in the social issues surrounding schooling as such, but in the quality of the learning experience for those already in school. Intense debate centered on the ways in which effectiveness could be identified and measured. Student achievement was the best litmus test for the interaction of various factors and processes, thereby demonstrating whether a school was effective or not. Being able to measure student achievement and compare it across schools, school systems and countries enabled educators and policy makers to make better decisions about where to place resources. This led to what is now known as the *standards movement* (Ravitch, 1996).

By the end of the 1970s most of the nations within Latin America subscribed to UNESCO's policy objectives which had been planned for the 3 decades that would usher mankind into the new millennium (Reimers, 2000a):

1. Universal access to the first 8 years of basic education;
2. Reduction in illiteracy;
3. Improvements in quality and efficiency in education systems.

These policy priorities and programs, however, became seriously undermined by the economic crisis experienced by most Latin American countries beginning in the mid-70s. United States trade deficits and

continuing debt from the Vietnam War created a situation that forced then US President Richard Nixon to take the economy off the gold standard. This action threw the worldwide financial community into confusion. For the remainder of the 70s and 80s, floating exchange rates affected the terms of existing loans. Interest rates on those loans skyrocketed creating a type of debt crisis which had never before been experienced in world history. Developing countries in Latin America were particularly vulnerable because they had borrowed extensively in order to finance large infrastructure development projects and government programs. As debtor countries were increasingly unable to pay their loans, government and development projects slowed or ceased. Unemployment grew as workers were laid off from such projects. With lower wages and income, many Latin American countries were forced to devalue their currencies. Foreign investments dropped as Latin American countries showed signs of less political stability which caused economic depression to sink even further (Quilligan, 2004).

Due to this crisis, Latin American governments were forced to slash their education budgets by searching for cost-effective ways to maintain their priority programs. Several education systems began exploring decentralization strategies both at national and local levels. Their idea was to both reduce budgetary constraints and to increase efficiency (Brunner, 2001). In the US, *school-based management* became popular. Other systems began implementing pilot *voucher* systems. Dialogue centered on administrative and financial efficiency (Reimers, 2000a). Throughout the Americas, policymakers and educators began asking themselves what the best investment might be for their limited economic resources to yield the best results. The time period from 1980 to 1990 became known in Latin America as the *Lost Decade* because education systems were forced to veer away from the policy priorities identified in the 70s (Reimers, 2000a). Policy priorities in North, Central and South America then shifted from *equality and equity* to *quality*.

In 1990, UNESCO held a world education conference in Jomtien, Thailand named Education For All (UNESCO, 2004a). The purpose of the conference was to recommit member countries to the policies identified in the 70s. Once more, expanding each countries' citizens' access to universal education became a central focus. Two new priorities were also added, which were: developing economic opportunity and promoting equity in education systems.

During the 1990's, net enrolment in primary schools rose to over 90 percent for most countries in the hemisphere. In 1996 net enrolment in primary schools was 86 percent in the Andean region, 91 percent in Mercosur, 81 percent in Central America,

and well over 90 percent in the Caribbean and North America. Nevertheless, today the most vulnerable groups, such as street and migrant children, children with special needs, and indigenous children, still have difficulties enrolling in school. (OAS, 2003, p. 5)

In 1998, the presidents of the Americas met in Santiago, Chile to discuss policy priorities. All agreed that education was the most important priority for the hemisphere. A specific focus of policy was identified to be alleviating poverty through the use of compensatory policies (Reimers, 2000a). Rosa María Torres, then Programme Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at UNESCO was commissioned by the Kellogg Foundation to perform a review of achievements in education reform over the decade of the 90s. Her general findings included the following:

1. The reform movement was revitalized after the economic challenges had interrupted such initiatives in the 80s.
2. New sources of funding were identified.
3. New commitments were made to engender innovation and experimentation in new projects.
4. A greater focus was made on disadvantaged groups and issues related to them, including gender equity.
5. A new emphasis was placed on systematic data gathering and analysis regarding assessment and demographic statistics.

However, the results were limited to the basic education level and fell short of the desired vision of reform at all levels (Torres, 2000).

In April of 2000, UNESCO held another World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (UNESCO, 2004c). The purpose was twofold: to report a 10-year evaluation of Education for All; and to recommit to the program and further commit themselves to the following objectives as laid out in the Dakar framework:

- (i) Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- (ii) Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, would have access to a completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- (iii) Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs;

- (iv) Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- (v) Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
- (vi) Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. (UNESCO, 2004c)

In general, the goals outlined above reflect the priorities of the last 50 years of public education in the Americas. Equality of access continues to be a salient topic for continuous monitoring especially at the level of adult literacy. Equity of opportunity is now identified as an even more salient issue as gaps in the achievement of certain sectors of society continue to widen, especially concerning gender disparities. The standards movement is fully positioned to monitor progress toward those goals throughout all of the Americas (Ravitch, 1996).

In November of 2001, UNESCO went a step further by pronouncing a Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 31st session. This declaration was made to recognize the importance of mother-tongue instruction and culturally compatible practices in education. Through this declaration, UNESCO and its member countries have committed themselves to the promotion of linguistic diversity and multiple cultural perspectives as a way of improving the quality of education. They believe that today's education must respond to an increasingly interdependent global economy (UNESCO, 2004b).

Clearly, progress has been made in the Americas in the development of public education systems. Most countries throughout North, Central and South America have achieved high levels of enrollment beginning in first grade (Puryear, 1997). One might therefore, consider that the first goal for achieving educational opportunity has been reached. However, it is important to consider a broader definition of *educational opportunity* in order to understand what is really happening.

What happens prior to reaching first grade and what happens after entering first grade is where a great deal of information regarding inequality in education begins to emerge. Some say that equal access is sufficient, yet others argue that using equal results across a student body is a better measure of equal educational opportunity. Since James Coleman's 1968 work *The Concept of Equality of Educational*

Opportunity, educators have been debating widely the many ways to define and measure opportunity (Howe, 2000). Noted philosopher Kenneth Howe (2000, p. 36) states:

The principle of equal educational opportunity can only be realized for cultural minorities by rendering educational opportunities worth wanting, and rendering educational opportunities worth wanting requires that minorities not be required to give up their identities in order to enjoy them.

Like Howe, Reimers (2000a) views educational opportunity as a continuum. Access to one level of opportunity, such as accessibility to enrollment, opens the door to another level of opportunity that gives way to yet further successive opportunities. Reimers' framework of educational opportunity provides a means to describe the current educational situation in the Latin American region as a whole.

According to Reimers, the central role of formal education is to structure experiences for learners in very deliberate ways which foster growth and development. Such experiences are intertwined and dependent on each other in order to bring about the obtaining of a desired level of skill. As each skill level is reached, a new "stage of opportunity" opens (2000a). Opportunities are built upon each other. Reimers warns against being deterministic when he insists that the model should be viewed as a set of pathways which are probable. There should be room for exceptions in individual cases. As an aggregate, students present a certain appearance. Individually, however, each one has both economic and family-related circumstances that may, over time, significantly alter the sequence and quality of opportunities for educational growth—either in a positive or a negative way. Reimers' model for educational opportunity delineates 5 stages. In the following section, each stage is described as I will offer a discussion of the general ways in which Latin American countries fall within each stage.

A Model for Educational Opportunity

Stage Description #1: Enrollment

The first level of opportunity begins the entire sequence. It involves the mechanisms needed to enroll children in school. Some researchers term this as *coverage* or *access to education*. For a country to show that it has achieved this basic level of opportunity for its citizens, it needs to provide the following three conditions: a sufficient number of schools and classrooms with appropriate space to house students within an acceptable traveling distance between home and school; the parents must be willing to send their sons and daughters to a school that will keep the children

safe; and students must be healthy enough to both attend school and to be able to concentrate on academic material.

Current status #1. In general, most Latin American countries have achieved this 1st stage (PREAL, 2001). It has taken initiative and policy prioritizing to reach this level (OAS, 2003). Most researchers agree that enrollment has gone up steadily in the last few decades (Brunner, 2001; Duryea & Székely, 1998; Reimers, 2000a; Saavedra-Chanduví, 2002). The greatest increase in enrollment has been at the pre-school level, up from 2.4 percent in 1960 to 23 percent in the mid-1990s. This increase, however, reflects mostly trends of urban children from mid to higher income levels (Schiefelbein, 1998). The enrollment in first grade for 7-year olds was identified in 1998 at a 95% level; however, children with special educational needs and those in very isolated areas are still underserved (Schiefelbein, 1998).

Stage Description #2: Quality

The second stage of opportunity requires that several factors be in place. Children need to persevere in the educational process each semester in order to build upon their skills. They need to complete a minimum number of school days within an academic year to engage in a sufficient amount of learning experiences that will help support further achievement. Children also need to come to school with sufficient pre-existing skills to be able to take advantage of formal schooling experiences. They need to stay sufficiently healthy to attend school regularly and engage fully in schooling. Children need teachers who are well-prepared to teach them in appropriate and meaningful ways at levels children can understand. All this implies the need for quality in teacher-student interaction as well as the proper management of resources such as time, materials and infrastructure.

This is the stage in which the great disparities in educational opportunity in Latin America begin to emerge. Political unrest, teacher absenteeism and low instructional quality are but a few examples that impede regular attendance and continuous enrollment. Most children from poor families come to school without pre-school experience. They must learn new norms of behavior and the processes required by formal schooling at a later age. The first experiences in formal schooling vary widely in quality across various population sectors.

Current status #2: Grade repetition. There exists a great variability in the quality of services (Saavedra-Chanduví, 2002) which often leads to great inequality in repetition and completion rates. In general, linguistic minority children and communities living in poverty experience substantially higher grade repetition rates in first grade as compared to their wealthier counterparts. At least 40% of students enrolled in the first-

grade repeat. This is a conservative estimate given that many students transfer to a new school to repeat and are not included in such counts (Schiefelbein, 1998). Most elementary students take 7 years to reach the fourth-grade because three grades are repeated (Schiefelbein, 1998).

Literacy rates. Illiteracy rates went from 34% in 1960 to 13% in 1995 (Reimers, 2000a). Clearly, this success in literacy has enabled the majority of Latin Americans to read, but only at a very basic level. Practically anyone can sound out and otherwise *decode* the written word; however, many citizens still don't understand what they read. A UNESCO test given to third and fourth graders throughout the region (including 13 countries) showed that 3 out of 4 children at the bottom half of the socio-economic strata did not understand what they read.

Public schools are producing a work force unable to comprehend written instructions, which limits its ability to adapt to technological change. This means that the performance levels attained by the future labor force will not enable it to contribute to national development. (Schiefelbein, 1998)

Test results. Brunner (2001) compared the results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 2001) across countries. The data suggested to him that the Latin American region ranked below all the developed countries including the nations of Southeast Asia, Central Europe and the East. He concluded that at the turn of the new millennium, average schooling levels in Latin America were comparable to that of:

1. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore in the 1970s
2. Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand in the 1960s

The Task Force on Education, Equity and Economic Competitiveness sponsored by the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas expressed similar concern (PREAL, 2001). Most Latin American countries don't participate in international testing, making cross-country and cross-regional comparisons difficult. This non-participation affects funding and resource allocation. However the few countries that do participate tend to be the ones that are more advanced in their educational reforms compared to their counterparts. The task force found that scores on national and international exams from the late 1990s were alarmingly low. Reviewing the results of the 1996 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Colombia ranked 40 of 41. In 1999, Chile finished 35 of 38. In region-wide tests administered by UNESCO (with less academic rigor than TIMSS), Cuba did much better with a smaller percentage of total government expenditures going to the education sector (Schiefelbein, 1998). Chile

and Colombia, which scored poorly on worldwide tests, only performed at average levels on the TIMSS test, suggesting that other countries (i.e. Bolivia) would do poorly as well.

These low results can be blamed on characteristics which are both internal and external to school systems (Brunner, 2001). External factors would include: extreme poverty; weak implementation of reforms; government ministries still operating under old paradigms; and a low acceptance of innovation, research and development. Internal factors include: the quality of teacher training, school governance, and expenditure on education systems. Although it is improving, the teaching workforce is generally characterized by: low levels of training, low levels of professionalism, low pay, and poor incentives for innovation (PREAL, 2001; UNESCO, 1996). Too much emphasis is placed on lecture and too little on differentiated and individualized instruction (OAS, 2003; PREAL, 2001; Schiefelbein, 1998). Furthermore, there are low expectations for students in terms of content and skill levels. Generally there is a low level of school autonomy and accountability.

There are also limited resources compared to private schools which tend to spend 5 to 10 times the amount per student (Brunner, 2001). Spending has increased but public investment per pupil is low and is concentrated in the higher education sector. Although the percentage of the Gross National Product (GNP) allotted to education by Latin American countries is higher than some developing countries (4.6 vs. 3.9). A significantly larger percentage of the population in the region is school-aged, so more spending needs to be made to reach adequate levels. The region's average percentages of the GNP are too low to narrow this gap. Governments tend to under-invest in primary and secondary schools and put much more into funding the university level because of the greater political clout of universities, which receive students who are more highly represented in the elite sector of society (PREAL, 2001; Schiefelbein, 1998).

Stage Description #3- Staying in School

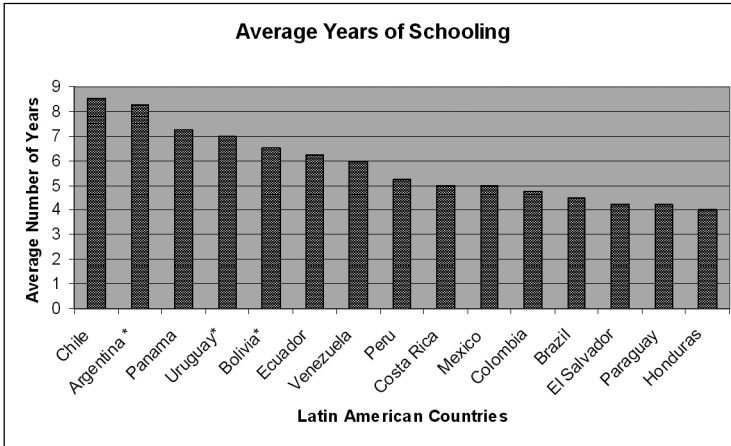
The third stage of opportunity concerns the ability to complete grade cycles. In order for a student to progress from one grade to the next, the factors from the 2 prior levels of opportunity need to already be present. Families and their children also need to see the value of continuing formal education as opposed to beginning to work for immediate economic needs. As students are made to repeat grade levels, they become more likely to drop out of formal schooling. Families begin to lose faith in their children's abilities to succeed in the educational system while, at the same time, the compounded pressure of economic needs are felt.

Therefore, the following factors need to be present in order to increase the likelihood that students will move onward in the educational system: sufficient successful experiences to promote students to higher grade levels; a perceived justification for keeping children in school; and delaying employment in the light of greater future benefits.

Current status #3: Average years of schooling. Due to the fact that the Latin American region is highly diverse with regard to the cultural, political and economic systems within each country, I will now give regional and national descriptions to provide an overall understanding of the context in which educational systems operate. The average level of education in a country or region is an important indicator of its *human capital*. Currently, less than a third of the Latin American workforce has completed the 12 years of schooling needed to earn a decent standard of livable wage generally defined as the minimum amount needed to afford basic housing, nourishment and services (OAS, 2003; PREAL, 2001). This average, however, is not an accurate indicator of the specific situations occurring in particular countries because of varying levels of economic development. For example, in the 1990s, Guatemala manifested that approximately half of its population of workers 25 years of age or older had no formal education at all; whereas countries such as Barbados and Argentina, when compared across equivalent measures, indicated an average educational level exceeding 7 years (Lora, 1998). On the whole, the average levels of education for Latin America still remain low compared to world patterns. In 1995, only four Latin American countries had enrollments at secondary levels at or above 50% of the population: Chile (55%), Peru (53%), Panama (51%) and Colombia (50%) (Bate, 2002; PREAL, 2001).

The table below shows a breakdown of average years of schooling by several countries in the region. It is important to point out as well that the effects of new educational initiatives to increase the average number of years in school only appear on long-term perspectives, as cohorts of students are tracked throughout their schooling, allowing them to complete the system. A 1995 comparison of regional cohorts born between 1938-40 and those born in 1968-70 “shows that, on average only about three years of progress has been made in years of education—approximately one year per decade” (Lora, 1998, p. 30).

The Report Card on Latin America (PREAL, 2001) succinctly compares the less than 1% annual growth in average schooling during the 1990s to that of 3% in the same time period for certain Asian countries (Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong). Lodoño and Székely (PREAL, 2001) tracked the average years of schooling for the Latin American and Asian regions and compared them to world averages between 1970 and 1995. By 1995, average years of schooling for Asia, the world and Latin America were approximately: 9.5, 7.3, and 5.4, respectively.



American countries (only those with urban data, from 1995).
Source: Lora, 1998.

Workers in Latin America have fewer average years of education compared to counterparts in Asia and many other parts of the world, and the gap is widening. Average schooling for rural areas is much lower than the national which appear on the graph (Lora, 1998).

Drop-out rates. During the 1990s, using data supplied by some Latin American countries in the region, only 50% of those who began first grade finished elementary school (Schiefelbein, 1998). Others (Bate, 2002; PREAL, 2001) have found that even though nearly all children begin first grade, by the fourth grade only 60% are still in school. In many countries, between a quarter to half of all students never make it to fifth grade (PREAL, 2001). In the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Colombia a quarter or more of the children who enroll in first grade fail to make it to second grade. By the ninth grade, only 15% of the poorest students remain as compared to private schools showing that by the ninth year 58% remain (Lora, 1998). This low retention rate is especially true of indigenous students from low-income backgrounds (Brunner, 2001).

Graduation rates. Graduation from high school, as one would suppose, remains a great challenge in Latin America. In 1998, of those students that moved on to secondary schools, only half of the Chilean students and only a third of the Mexican students graduated (PREAL, 2001). Alternatively, privately schooled children spend twice as many years in school as those in public schools. By the time publicly and privately-schooled citizens graduate and then reach retirement age, university graduates may earn 10 times more than their unschooled counterparts (Lora, 1998). This means that the earning gap exacerbates

between high school drop-outs and graduates across the span of years when workers earn income.

Equity and compensatory education. Even as enrollment has increased significantly, the quality of services remains poor across the board, those who feel the compounded effects of the weaknesses in the system are: low income families; those living in rural areas; girls; indigenous communities; and certain racial and ethnic groups. Generally, low-income students attend low-quality public schools that hold only 3 to 4 hours of class daily. Alternatively, students from mid to upper income levels tend to go to private schools that offer 5 to 6 hours of instruction daily and therefore show significantly higher achievement (PREAL, 2001). Furthermore, the percentage of people living below the average poverty line has increased in the 1990s to 36% (information from 1997). This reflects the lives of 204 million people and does not account for the millions more that hover just above the poverty line (Reimers, 2000a). A large percentage of the poor are made up of indigenous people. Table 1, below, shows the poverty rates for indigenous poor in three countries.

Guatemala	87% of indigenous families live in poverty.	
	61% of those in extreme poverty	
Peru	79% of indigenous families live in poverty	
Mexico	80% of municipalities with predominantly indigenous families are classified as living in poverty	

Table 1. Poverty rates for indigenous poor in three Latin American countries. Source: Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, as cited in Reimers, 2000a.

In countries that are predominantly indigenous, such as Bolivia and Guatemala, equity of education is particularly problematic. The gap in average years of schooling between indigenous and non-indigenous adults (between 1997-1999) in the following four countries is: Brazil- 2.5 years, Guatemala- 3 years, Peru- 3.5 years, and Bolivia- 5 years (PREAL, 2001). In fact, "...native speakers of indigenous languages are far more likely to repeat, drop out, and (sic) work as children and have much lower achievement than native Spanish speakers" (Winkler in Reimers, 2000a, p. 40). In Bolivia, the average number of years of schooling for indigenous monolingual children is 0.4 compared to Spanish-speaking indigenous students at 6.5 and non-indigenous students at 9.7 (Reimers, 2000b). Indigenous girls tend to get notably fewer years of education compared to the boys in their communities (Schieffelbein, 1998). However, non-indigenous girls are just as likely to attend and complete their school careers as the boys in their communities (PREAL, 2001).

Rural communities versus urban communities also show lower attendance and achievement rates. "In almost every country for which

data are available, living in rural areas compounds education inequalities” (PREAL, 2001, p. 9). For example, in Nicaragua, data from 1999 shows secondary enrollment rates between urban and rural students to be 77.5 and 36.7%, respectively. Jamaica showed the most even distribution at 75.1% urban and 69.7% for rural enrollment (PREAL, 2001). In Latin America, therefore, living in a rural area may be equated with under-education and a higher chance of having insufficient means to cover basic needs.

Stage Description #4- Benefits of Being Schooled

The fourth stage depends on the prior 3 stages and is therefore successively more difficult to attain. At this stage, families and the broader society can evaluate whether the investment in formal schooling has truly added value to student human capital. Do they indeed possess the necessary skills on a level which is sufficient for functioning well in society as well as for earning a wage which will supply their needs? Once completing the full curriculum, graduates also need to know that their collection of skills and knowledge is, in fact, comparable to that of graduates across similar communities. They need to be able to compete on a level field. This level of opportunity requires the following factors:

1. Added value for the investment of time and effort.
2. Skills and knowledge that allow graduates to compete equally with others.

Current status #4. Do the educational systems in Latin America serve their citizens in a way that allows them to improve their economic circumstances? It is generally agreed that present systems not only help maintain historic inequalities but are now further intensifying them (Lora, 1998, p. 31; PREAL, 2001; Reimers, 2000b). The “wealthiest 10% of 25-year-olds have 5 to 8 more years of schooling than the poorest 30%” (PREAL, 2001, p. 8). Of all regions in the world, the region with the greatest income gap is found in Latin America. Although many variables affect income inequality, it is apparent that having more years of education generally translates to higher levels of income. In fact, education as a predictive variable is more significant than “globalization and the introduction of labor-saving technologies” which have affected developing countries throughout the globe. Such disparities are more evident in Latin America and the gap is widening more swiftly than in the rest of the world (Lora, 1998).

Stage Description #5

The fifth stage of opportunity focuses on the expansion of future life opportunities. Once a graduate has an education that is equivalent to that of the majority of other graduates, will he or she receive an equal share of societal benefits? This level of educational opportunity helps answer the question: Were the years invested in education worthwhile? How does this return on investment vary across traits such as gender, race, ethnicity, location, age, years of experience and occupation? If responses are to be affirmative at the present stage in history, the following elements need to be in place:

1. Education systems need to foster in their graduates non-discriminatory attitudes that value diversity.
2. Education systems need to help students develop competencies and skills that facilitate collective organization and political effectiveness in order to transform existing structures that currently limit social and economic opportunities in life.

Current status #5. Regional characterizations need to be qualified once again with the observation that the countries within Latin America are highly diverse both within each country in particular and across the region. There are, however, some patterns across the region that can be observed. Developmental resources have fallen far short of improving social equity. Such equity is critical for sustained development (Birdsall & Jaspersen, 1997).

Social inequalities largely arise from limited and low-quality education leading to substantial differences in the ability to earn income. Therefore, it is important to examine how well educational systems are facilitating the ability for students to work their way out of poverty. Generally, in Latin America, finishing primary school means one will earn 50% more than someone who has never gone to school. Someone who graduates from high school will earn 120% more. The few that are able to obtain an undergraduate degree will earn 200% more than an unschooled counterpart (Lora, 1998). Is such a dramatic earning potential made possible through schooling? Those who obtain greater levels of formal schooling have more choices in terms of employment because they have more social and technical skills to offer in the marketplace, all other variables being held constant. They also tend to take better care of their health (through eating habits and exercise). This may allow them to seek better support for their families and even limit the number of children they have in order to distribute resources in efficient ways. In effect, a higher level of education can produce a chain reaction of well-being at all levels of an individual's life. As such, effects are experienced

on community levels and greater numbers of citizens should be able to organize themselves and to participate in the positive change that is taking place on a political and economic level.

Resource distribution. A tool used to study income inequality is the Gini coefficient which is a measure of how evenly resources are distributed across a country's population. The more evenly income levels are distributed within a country, the closer this coefficient is to zero. Conversely, the more inequitably such a resource is distributed, the closer this coefficient is to 1 (Reimers, 2000b). Countries such as Namibia and Brazil tend to be more inequitable in their distribution of wealth. This means that a small percentage of the population owns much of the wealth in the country and a large percentage of the population has much lower income. Other countries, such as Denmark, have wealth more evenly distributed throughout their population. Interestingly, the Latin American countries that have more evenly distributed education also tend to have more evenly distributed incomes. The graphs below demonstrate this fact.

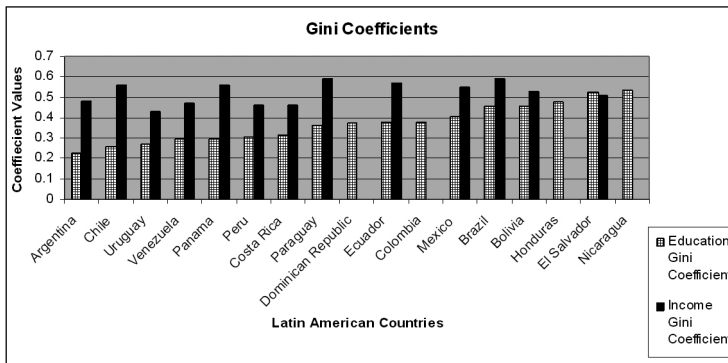


Figure 3. Gini coefficients by country in Latin America, including the coefficients for distribution in education and income. Note: Inequality is greater as the value approximates the value of 1. Source: Reimers, 2000b.

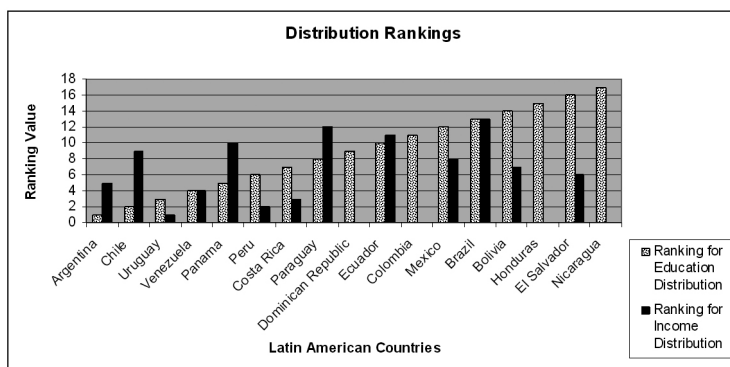


Figure 4. Distribution rankings by country. Countries with the most equitable distribution for education are ranked first. Countries with the highest inequality in education are ranked last. Source: (Reimers, 2000b).

Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion to analyze in fine detail the influences of income and educational distribution in each country, these general observations allow the reader to get a basic picture of both the patterns and the variability of the region.

There are patterns of educational and resulting income inequality in Latin America, and these patterns become more intensified or alleviated due to certain variables that seem to be moving in the same direction across the region's countries. Some of these variables are: gender, localization (urban/rural), occupation and years of experience. Women still earn less than men. Workers in rural localities earn less than those living in urban areas. Occupations requiring less formal training pay less than those requiring more formal training. A concrete example is that those working in the agricultural sector will have significantly lower income than those working in the financial sector.

Once workers gain a certain educational level, it can be predicted that they will earn more money over time with years of work experience. The more highly educated a worker is, the higher the compensation levels become over time and at an accelerating rate. In effect, the education level of an individual has a multiplicative effect so that, if all other variables are held constant, income growth becomes exponential. For example, Lora (1998, p. 33) found that in Brazil,

At 40 years of age, the income difference will be six to one, and at 55 years of age it will exceed 10 to one. Brazil has the largest income differences attributable to educational level and age. However, Latin America's average age profiles show that, at 25

years of age, income differences attributable to education are in the range of five to one, while at 55 years of age they are eight to one (for workers with 17 years of education compared with uneducated workers).

The rate at which one's education level grows or slows down as a multiplier is tempered by the level of education in society at large. Societies where most of the citizens are well educated will experience a lower multiplicative rate. Societies where most of the citizens maintain a lower average level of education will experience a larger multiplicative rate. In this sense, the role of education is to compound inequality in income distribution (as this relates to the level of a society's economic development).

Conclusions

Reimers' framework using the 5 levels of equal educational opportunity was used to summarize information regarding the status of education in the Latin American region until the late 1990s. This was done to give a broad overview to those new to the topic of education in the region. The reader has been made aware of the many both external and internal issues affecting millions of schoolchildren and their families today. As practitioners, policymakers and researchers work in this area to implement or further expand educational reform programs, it will be important to understand the historical setting in which these efforts take place in order to more accurately and effectively place resources where they will yield the best results.

Reimers' model of equal educational opportunity provides a useful way to make sense of the many issues inherent in educational reform initiatives. It shows the ways that historical societal inequities continue to exert a powerful influence despite the best efforts and good intentions of national policymakers, international initiatives and funding agencies. Yet it also helps illuminate the issue of where more resources can be placed to yield a greater effect throughout the educational systems. The general understanding one can come away with regarding equal educational opportunity in Latin America is that although substantial effort and resources have been invested, historic inequalities persist throughout all levels of Reimers' chain of equal educational opportunity:

1. Stage 1- Enrollment has greatly increased at primary levels with higher representation in both urban areas and mid to upper-income families.

2. Stage 2- There is great variability in the quality of services provided to students. In general, children living within any combination of the factors of poverty, linguistic or ethnic minority status, or location in a rural area, tend to have significantly higher grade repetition rates and lower functional literacy.
3. Stage 3- As a region, less than a third of all students graduate from school. Moreover, the average Latin American has significantly less years of schooling compared to Asians and citizens in many other countries.
4. Stage 4- The total years of education one earns in Latin America has a much greater effect on total earning power over the long run compared to more highly developed countries where the effect of education is less powerful. In Latin America, workers with higher total years of education mostly come from higher income communities and have done their schooling privately.
5. Stage 5- The benefits of staying in school expand beyond the personal level while they intensify their effect at the societal level. Lower levels of schooling within each country continue to stratify citizens socio-economically. The gaps are widening.

Much remains to be done to close the divide between rich and poor, mainstream and indigenous, rural and urban citizens. If action is not taken swiftly, not only will immense human capital be under-served and under-utilized but the effects of a highly technological global economy will exacerbate inequality both within particular countries and across the Latin American region. The quality of the teaching force needs to be raised and well compensated to provide incentives for a high-quality instruction which will be relevant and accessible to students of widely varying backgrounds. Valid instruments of measuring the quality of services need to be expanded in order to provide more systematic information upon which administrators may make decisions. By raising the quality of instruction, we trust that more students will stay in school to close the gap between enrollments in primary versus secondary school. Equitable and compensatory programs need to be expanded to reach the most disenfranchised sectors of Latin American communities not only to promote quality of life but to raise the level of economic prosperity for entire communities. As educational levels become more evenly dispersed so will income— which, in turn, provides opportunities for all.

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