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Series Editor's Preface

This series will comprise nineteen volumes, between them looking at education in virtually every territory in the world. The initial volume, *Education Around the World: A Comparative Introduction*, aimed to provide an insight to the field of international and comparative education. It looked at its history and development and then examined a number of major themes at scales from local to regional to global. It is important to bear such scales of observation in mind because the remainder of the series is inevitably regionally and nationally based.

The identification of the eighteen regions within which to group countries has sometimes been a very simple task, elsewhere less so. Europe, for example, has four volumes and more than fifty countries. National statistics vary considerably in their availability and accuracy, and in any case date rapidly. Consequently, the editors of each volume point the reader towards access to regional and international datasets, available on line, that are regularly updated. A key purpose of the series is to give some visibility to a large number of countries that, for various reasons, rarely, if ever, have coverage in the literature of this field.

The region with which this book is concerned is one of the more straightforward to identify. South America is, after all, one of the recognized continents of the world. However, not all of its political geography is included in this volume because parts have had to be placed elsewhere. Guyana is in the volume on the Commonwealth Caribbean and Netherlands Antilles, as is Suriname, while the former French Guiana is now part of France itself and therefore in the European Union. The remainder of South America is divided between its two major linguistic identities, Spanish and Portuguese. The latter is represented by Brazil, by far the largest and most populous country on the continent and one of the world's rising stars. The former is represented by all the other countries, but it must be remembered that there are innumerable indigenous Amerindian communities with their indigenous vernaculars, as well as areas where other European languages of immigrant groups still remain.

Given this diverse and complex picture I would like to thank the editor, Simon Schwartzman, for the skill and care with which he has assembled and presented this important volume in the series.

Colin Brock
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Introduction

Regional Overview

Simon Schwartzman

Context

This book deals with the current state of education in the ten countries of the South American continent (not including Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana, which are culturally and historically closer to the Caribbean region). These countries were all part of the Iberian colonial empires – Spain and Portugal – until early in the nineteenth century when they became independent, with the Spanish colonies splitting into several republics while Brazil remained unified under a Portuguese monarchy.

On the Pacific coast, the colonizers found large and well-established agrarian societies, including the Inca empire, which reached regions of what is today Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and the north of Chile, and, in Colombia, the Muisca confederation. The native population was subdued and forced into servitude (the ‘encomienda’ and ‘repartimiento’ systems) to work in mining and agriculture and forced to convert to Catholicism and speak Spanish, but often kept their languages and many of their cultural traditions. In Chile, the Spanish met the Mapuches, a group of indigenous groups who inhabited mostly the South of the Continent, including Patagonia, and for centuries resisted the encroachment of the colonizers.

On the Atlantic coast, there are vestiges of a large and well-organized population, the Cambeba, that may have inhabited the Amazon basin but did not survive the first encounters with the Europeans. Further to the South, the Portuguese found a large number of semi-nomadic tribes – including the Tupi-Guaraní groups – that were mostly decimated or took refuge in inaccessible places. The Jesuits, who arrived in America with the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers, tried to organize the natives in agricultural settlements (the Indian Reductions), which were later destroyed but had a lasting presence in Paraguay, where most of the population still speaks Guaraní. To work in their mines and

plantations, the Portuguese brought to Brazil millions of African slaves, mostly to the regions of Bahia, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. In Argentina and Uruguay, most of the native population was also decimated.

The Spanish and Portuguese did not come to South America as settlers, as did the pioneers in New England, but mostly to exploit the actual or imaginary richness of the new world. Many of them did not bring their families, and, even if they did, mingled with the local population and the slaves, creating large, stratified mixed-blood populations that also combined the cultural, religious and linguistic traits of their different origins. By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Chile received large numbers of immigrants from Italy, Germany and other European regions. Brazil and Peru also received immigrants from Japan, in addition to continuous flows of immigrants from Spain to different countries and from Portugal to Brazil.

In spite of significant differences, none of these countries reached full industrialization. Today, they are middle-income countries in comparative terms, with Paraguay and Bolivia being significantly poorer. Their economies depend largely on the extraction and export of primary products, wealth is highly concentrated, and political institutions remain mostly unstable, subject to internecine conflicts and weak institutions. Until the mid-twentieth century, most of the population lived in rural areas, but later moved to the cities, which now suffer with the problems of urban overcrowding and criminality (Table I.1).

Education, both in the Spanish and the Portuguese colonies, was limited to the local élites, and was provided by Catholic priests in their parishes. Already, in the sixteenth century, the Spanish replicated their universities in several places in Latin America, but the first university in Brazil was only established in the 1930s. South America never had the traditions of popular literacy stemming from the Reform and Counter-Reform movements that were later incorporated into the public education systems established in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Archer, 1979; Collins, 1995; Ramirez and Boli, 1987), and public education was seldom considered necessary for the production of wealth and the creation of a modern nation state. In the nineteenth century, some countries sought to emulate the European nation states and introduce public, universal education, thanks to the works of Andrés Bello in Chile, Domingo Sarmiento, in Argentina, and José Pedro Varela, in Uruguay (Demarchi and Rodriguez, 1994; Halperín Donghi, 1995; Serrano, 1994). This history led to a nostalgia about a glorious past of excellent public education that may have existed in these countries in the earlier twentieth century that, as Juan Carlos Tedesco writes about Argentina (Chapter 1), is to a large extent mythical, and in any case did not

Table I.1 South American countries, selected development indicators, 2012

	Adjusted net national income per capita (constant 2005 US\$)	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	Employment in industry (% of total employment)	Employment in services (% of total employment)	Urban population (% of total)
Chile	6,827.37	—	—	—	89.35
Uruguay	6,643.31	—	—	—	92.64
Argentina	5,075.77	0.60	23.40	75.30	92.79
Venezuela	4,940.28	7.70	21.20	70.70	93.70
Brazil	4,891.63	14.50	21.20	64.30	84.87
Peru	3,558.11	—	—	—	77.58
Colombia	3,450.93	16.90	20.90	62.20	75.57
Ecuador	2,828.37	27.80	17.80	54.40	67.98
Paraguay	1,346.64	27.20	16.10	56.70	62.44
Bolivia	965.56	—	—	—	67.22

Source: World Development Indicators; Employment data from Brazil based on the National Household Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostragem de Domicilio – PNAD) 2012 (22 June 2014).

survive the expansion of public education in more recent years. Brazil also had some early experiences of good-quality public education, particularly in the state of São Paulo, but this reached just a small segment of its population. In the 1920s and 1930s, immigrants from Germany, Italy and Japan to Brazil created their own schools, but soon teaching in a foreign language was forbidden and the schools closed by the government as a threat to the nation. Public education was just starting to become a national concern, but half of the Brazilian population was still illiterate in 1950 (Schwartzman, 2004; Williams, 2001).

Access, equity and quality of education

Gradually, particularly after World War II, as urbanization increased, all countries in the region created or expanded public education, while the Catholic Church also expanded its networks of private schools. Teaching was provided in Spanish or Portuguese in Brazil, according to the curricula copied or adapted from Spain, Portugal and sometimes France. By the end of the twentieth century, all South American countries had reached the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for 2015 in education, with most children enrolled and completing

Table I.2 South America, fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goals in education

	Net enrolment ratio in primary education (2011)	Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reached last grade of primary	Literacy rate of 15–24 year-olds
Argentina	99.1	93.1	99.2
Bolivia	86.8	86.2	99.0
Brazil*	93.4	86.1	98.6
Chile	92.7	98.7	98.9
Colombia	86.5	84.7	98.2
Ecuador	96.8	91.4	98.6
Paraguay	82.6	80.1	98.6
Peru	96.3	73.9	98.7
Uruguay	99.8	94.7	99.0
Venezuela	94.4	93.9	98.5

* The data for Brazil is based on the National Household Survey (PNAD) of 2012. 'Primary Education' refers to children enrolled in grades 1–5 of fundamental education. The completion rate is a comparison of enrolment rates of grades 2 and 5.

Source: United National Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators; <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx> (latest available figures).

primary education, and basic literacy reaching almost 100 per cent of the young population (Table I.2).

However, the quality of education remains critical. Six countries in the region participate in the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) for 15-year-olds at the corresponding school level, and the results are not good (Table I.3). In all countries, 60 per cent or more of the students perform below the required standards in mathematics, and 40 per cent or more below the standards in language skills. At the other extreme, the number of top performers is very small, not reaching 2 per cent of the students in the best situations. They are at the bottom of the international rankings in student performance and have not changed much through the several assessment rounds, except for Chile, which shows the best results in the group.¹ An earlier comparative assessment done in 2006 by UNESCO in Latin America, for third graders, found that the best performers were students from Uruguay and Chile, with Paraguay, Peru and Ecuador at the bottom (Ganimian, 2009: 12), with no information available for Bolivia.

In all countries, girls tend to outperform boys in school attendance and reading (Duryea et al., 2007; González de San Román and de la Rica, 2012), religious and

Table I.3 Outcomes of South American countries in the PISA study

	Below Level 1 (%)	Level 1 (%)	Level 2 (%)	Level 3 (%)	Level 4 (%)	Level 5 (%)	Level 6 (%)	Underperformers (1 or less) (%)	Top performers (5 and 6) (%)	Rank (out of 65 countries)
<i>Language 2009</i>										
Chile	1.0	28.0	33.2	17.5	18.9	1.5	0.0	61.2	1.5	44
Uruguay	5.4	37.9	27.7	12.8	14.7	1.4	0.1	65.6	1.5	47
Colombia	3.0	38.7	31.6	13.7	12.1	0.9	0.0	70.3	0.9	52
Brazil	4.7	48.6	27.4	9.5	8.9	0.8	0.0	76.0	0.8	53
Argentina	9.1	41.5	27.1	10.6	10.9	0.8	0.1	68.6	0.9	58
Peru	12.9	51.2	23.0	6.9	5.7	0.3	0.1	74.2	0.4	63
<i>Mathematics 2012</i>										
Chile	22.0	29.5	23.5	15.4	6.2	1.5	0.1	53.0	1.6	44
Uruguay	29.2	26.5	23.0	14.4	5.4	1.3	0.1	49.5	1.4	47
Colombia	41.6	32.2	17.8	6.4	1.6	0.3	0.0	50.0	0.3	52
Brazil	35.2	31.9	20.4	8.9	2.9	0.7	0.0	52.3	0.7	53
Argentina	34.9	31.6	22.2	9.2	1.8	0.3	0.0	53.8	0.3	59
Peru	47.0	27.4	16.1	6.7	2.1	0.5	0.0	43.5	0.5	63

Source: OECD, PISA.

private schools are better than public schools; to a large extent because they are more selective (Duarte et al., 2010; Menezes-Filho, 2007; Somers et al., 2004) and, most significantly, student achievement is strongly correlated with family socio-economic status and the level of development of their regions. Santiago Cueto, Juan León and Alejandra Miranda, in Chapter 17, making use of the Young Lives longitudinal study for Peru, document many of these gaps, and show that there is a perverse triangle in education, linking individual socio-economic characteristics, education opportunities and the student education outcomes: students from poor families have less education opportunities and perform badly, which thwarts their future chances of moving out of poverty. Cynthia Brizuela, in Chapter 16, also documents the dismaying quality of education in Paraguay, both for Spanish and Guaraní speakers, and lists the issues that may explain this situation: deficiency in teachers' initial education and in-service training, poor school infrastructure, little use of ICT in the educational process, and insufficient number of effective days and hours of classes in the school year – a list that could be easily applied to all other countries.

There is a growing awareness that this vicious circle should be broken at the very early ages, with differential support and appropriate pedagogical methods for pre-schoolers and children at the literacy age, as discussed in the articles by Marina Camargo Abello for Colombia (Chapter 13) and João Batista Araujo e Oliveira for Brazil (Chapter 6).

Education policies

After World War II, thanks to the rising demands of the urban population as well as international support and cooperation, all countries extended their education coverage and created ministries and regional secretariats of education to administer and provide support to their schools. There was also a growing realization that education was an essential ingredient for economic development, a notion that is well established in international literature but is still not fully understood in South America. Education, like health, has a value on itself, which cannot be measured in dollars or pesos. However, both the costs and the economic benefits are all too real for society and for individuals who make the decisions to invest their or their families' resources in education. Fernando de Holanda Barbosa Filho and Fernando Veloso estimate the 'social internal rate of return' to education in Brazil (Chapter 7), comparing public costs and benefits of schooling at different levels, both currently and by making estimations

considering Brazil's intention of raising public expenditures to 10 per cent of GDP in the next ten years. They find a worrisome trend, namely that, as the public sector increases its expenditures, the social benefits of education come down, a trend that may get worse in the future. On the other hand, demographic changes may allow for greater investments per student without increasing the overall costs of education. In any case, it would be necessary to make sure that the additional resources are used efficiently, so as to maximize its social and private returns. This is particularly important because there is evidence that there is little or no correlation between costs and quality of education, both in Brazil and elsewhere (Menezes-Filho et al, 2009).

Public expenditures on education in Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil today are around 6–7 per cent of GDP, and around 4–5 per cent in other countries, except for Peru, which is around 2.5 per cent (no information is available for Venezuela).² Most of the resources are used to pay teachers' salaries and to expand and maintain the school buildings. The investments are significant for the country's budgets, and not very different, in relative terms, to what one would find in developed economies, but are small in absolute values, given the size of the countries' economies and their tax bases.

In the past, the main education policy consisted of opening new schools and making them available to the population. Now, governments have to deal with growing costs, teacher demands for higher salaries and better working conditions, and the growing awareness about the bad quality of the education the students are getting. Education policies are getting more complex. In spite of the large differences between the countries in the region, they all have to deal with similar issues: the questions of governance about the rights and obligations for education provision; the role of the public and the private sectors; the issues of centralization and decentralization; the questions related to teachers, in terms of their training, their careers and the roles played by the teachers' unions and professional organizations; issues of curriculum, about what the students should learn and how they should be taught, and also the potential benefits of introducing new information technologies in the classroom; questions of social equity, related to the support required for students from underprivileged sectors of society, including issues of multicultural education, particularly in relation to cultural and linguistic minorities; questions of assessment and quality assurance – how to know if the students are learning what they should, if they benefit from what they learn, and how to make use of the information provided by the assessments to improve education quality; and the question of resources, in terms of how much can and should be invested to improve quality, equity and make education useful and productive for society as a whole.

Governance

The prevailing view in South America is that the national state should be the main provider of public education – the ‘teaching state’ – a notion established since the years of independence in the nineteenth century, when the national states were organized and inspired by France and often in conflict with the Catholic Church, which however maintained an important presence at all levels of education in most countries. As public education expanded, bringing in more people from lower socio-economic conditions, its quality, if any, deteriorated, and the upper and middle classes sent their children to Catholic schools and to an expanding private sector.

Juan Carlos Tedesco (Chapter 1) writes about the attempts to recover the trust of society in public education in Argentina by introducing a new national education law in 2006 through an elaborate process of public consultation with many sectors of society, followed by significant investments in student grants and school inputs. These policies were meant to move away from what he describes as ‘the neoliberal discourse based on privatization, deregulation, and the market as the solution to all our problems’ that emerged in the 1990s, but never gained legitimacy. The new policies, however, were not enough to reverse the low quality and loss of legitimacy of public education in Argentina, which would require, for him, ‘modifying more complex cultural and institutional variables such as prejudices, stereotypes, and teacher attitudes, work organization and management styles’, all of which should be implemented without losing sight of the leading role of public education in taking care of quality and assuring equity and social justice.

In Chapter 2, Silvina Gvirtz, Angela Inés Oría and Esteban Torre agree with Tedesco about the failure of recent policies to improve education in Argentina, and attribute it to failures in the system of governance adopted in the education sector. They also agree that the solution is not to reduce the presence of the public sector and increase the role of markets and the private sector, but to strengthen the links between the national government and society, making public education more public and less bureaucratic, by, among other practices, giving more voice to parents and other constituencies, strengthening the role of school districts and implementing better management practices at the school level.

The idea of a national pact on behalf of education is also the central theme of Chapter 13 by Marina Camargo Abello on Colombia’s national policy for childhood education. This policy is being developed through a strategy that

seeks to bring together all sectors and levels of government and all social groups and movements involved in education in the country. The coordination is carried out by an inter-ministerial commission established at the President's office level, so as to avoid its capture by the Ministry of Education alone. The implicit assumption is that the interests and motivations of these different sectors converge, and that, differently from Argentina, controversial issues can be overcome by permanent consultation and participation. Since this policy is just starting, it will be interesting to see what is achieved in the next few years.

The two chapters on Ecuador – by Pablo Cevallos Estarellas and Daniela Bramwell (Chapter 15) and by Orazio Bellettini, Adriana Arellano and Wendy Espín (Chapter 14) – also refer to the efforts to build consensus in gaining support for the implementation of education policies, which included a national referendum to support the country's education plan. They coincide in their view that, after a long period of political and institutional instability, the country is finally being able to put together a coherent education policy, thanks to the stability and political support enjoyed by President Rafael Correa and the effort to reach consensus in society about these policies. The current policies, at least on paper, tackle all crucial issues affecting education, including provision of material resources to schools, financial incentives to the families, teacher training, changes in the curriculum and special attention being given to multicultural education. They also note, however, that many goals established in the current legislation and plans are still to be fully implemented, and there is no evidence, so far, that these policies are actually changing the quality of education that the students receive.

The disconnect between the official education policies, as present in existing legislation, and what actually takes place is a common feature of many countries, where the legislation is either prepared by qualified experts or results from complicated negotiations between government officers, teachers' unions and social movements. One striking case is Paraguay, which, as described by Cynthia Brizuela (Chapter 16), has an extremely well-elaborated legislation, including provisions to deal with multilingual education for the Guaraní speaking population, without, however, any detectable impact in the quality of education the population receives in any language.

Like Argentina, Colombia and Ecuador, Brazil also has experience of trying to build consensus by mobilizing teachers' unions, academics, non-governmental organizations and local and state education bureaucracies in national education conferences and, more recently, in the preparation of a National Plan for Education, enacted in law in 2014, which includes, among its 20 targets, that the

country should spend 10 per cent of its GDP in education, and that 50 per cent of the schoolteachers should have masters or doctoral degrees by 2024. Similar to what happened in Argentina, the plan avoided controversial issues that displeased the unions, related for instance to improvements in the content of teacher education or the introduction of performance-based teacher careers and accountability, turning it into more of a wish list than an actual framework for effective policy making (Ministério da Educação, 2014; Congresso Nacional, 2014; Castro et al., 2011).

Brazil is also similar to Argentina in the sense that growing investments in public education in the past decades did not lead to significant improvements in education quality, although it did lead to improvements in access. Brazil is a federation with 27 states and more than 200 million people, and, historically, some of the most developed states, such as São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Minas Gerais, have taken the lead in expanding public education, while the national government sought to set the broad legal and pedagogical framework and to provide assistance to the poorer states and regions. The 1988 Constitution granted more autonomy to municipalities in education as well as in other areas, consolidating a complicated three-tier system of education governance, which is the subject of Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro's contribution (Chapter 4). To play its coordinating role, the National government, since the 1990s, established an effective funding mechanism for states and municipalities, a national system of education statistics and assessment, and several programmes to support education nationwide, from the distribution of free textbooks to the conditional cash transfer programme for poor families with children of school age. There are, however, many instances of overlap and lack of coordination among the three levels of government, leading often to competing demands that affect the daily activities of public schools. The same tensions between centralization and decentralization happened in Colombia, where, as shown by Santiago Isaza (Chapter 12), education is formally decentralized to local authorities, but, in practice, strongly controlled by the central government, which manages the budgets and establishes most of the contents that students should learn. Isaza also describes the experience of a successful partnership between local government and the private sector, as a means of strengthening the capacity of local governments to improve the quality of their schools. There are many other examples of public–private partnerships in education in many Latin American countries, and Brazil has several important experiences that should be known better (Schwartzman et al, 2010), one of them mentioned in more detail by João Batista Araujo e Oliveira on the issues of literacy in Brazil (Chapter 6).

The most dramatic attempt to move away from state dominance and the prevalence of public education took place in Chile in the 1980s, under the military government of Pinochet, which adopted the free market theories of the Chicago School. As described by Cristián Bellei and Xavier Vanni (Chapter 8) and also Gregory Elacqua (Chapter 10), the government transferred all public schools and teachers from the national to local governments and introduced a voucher system open both to public and private schools, for profit or not, inducing the schools to compete for students in an open market. The reform also deregulated the teaching career and allowed schools greater flexibility in devising their course programmes. To provide information about the schools' qualities, the government introduced a system of student assessment, which, however, took several years to be implemented. The rationale was that, free from the government's bureaucracy and the power of the teachers' unions, the schools would compete for quality and the education sector would attract private investments, reducing the need of the central government to increase its subsidy to the education sector. The only clear effect of these policies was to increase the presence of private education in the country: the private, subsidized schools did not perform significantly better than the public ones, while inequality increased. The centre-left coalition that ruled Chile after Pinochet, from 1990 to 2010, followed by the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera, did not change this institutional design, but very significantly increased the public investments in education and introduced policies to reduce inequities in school access, to improve the qualification of teachers, and to reform the school curriculum, among others. Data from OECD's PISA shows that Chile was the only country in the region to show consistent improvements in its education, which is now the best in South America, although still well below OECD standards. In spite of these achievements, the current Chilean government, headed by Michelle Bachelet, was elected with the promise to eliminate for-profit education in the country, as demanded by strong student protests and street demonstrations in recent years. A careful analysis of the student performance of public, for-profit and non-profit private schools, presented by Gregory Elacqua (Chapter 10), shows that private, not-for-profit schools tend to perform better than both public and private for-profit schools in Chile. The differences, although significant, are not large, which suggests that the end of the for-profit sector is not likely to affect much the conditions of Chilean education in the future.

At the other extreme, Venezuela, in the past fifteen years, as shown by Mabel Mundó (Chapter 19), is trying to revolutionize its education by replacing or combining the conventional school system with a highly politicized parallel

education movement based on government ‘missions’ and grassroots collectives, as part of a project to build what is being called ‘Socialism of the Twenty-First Century’. The main goal of this policy is to include as many people as possible in education, which is done, among other things, by brushing away all barriers for admission, promotion and graduation related to competence and academic achievement. In a highly polarized society as is Venezuela today, this policy may have been useful to rally political support to the government, but the general impression (since there are no data) is that the education system is rapidly deteriorating, and the quality of education in the country is moving backwards.

Teachers

The tradition in most countries was that primary school teachers would get their education at secondary level normal schools, which offered one of the few or only professional opportunities for middle-class women willing to work. Teaching in the few existing, public or religious secondary schools was also a prestigious activity, mostly for men with higher education degrees. This situation changed dramatically as basic education became universal and the expansion of higher education brought new professional alternatives for men and women, offering more prestigious and better-paying jobs. Again in most countries, the old normal schools were replaced by faculties of education or pedagogy, which recruited people aspiring to university-level careers but had difficulties following the more demanding courses in prestigious fields such as medicine, engineering and law. This situation led to two important and negative outcomes for the teaching profession. First, the new, university-trained teachers did not have the middle-class culture and values and good quality general education that was taken for granted for the older generation; and second, they had to deal with a much larger population of students often coming from illiterate families and poor neighbourhoods, which they did not know how to handle.

The recently created faculties of education and pedagogy were not prepared to deal with this situation, and tended to develop study programmes that dealt more with the broader interpretations of the problems faced by the schools and the teacher profession than with the preparation of teachers to deal with their students. Denise Vaillant, writing on Uruguay (Chapter 18), and Beatrice Ávalos, writing on Chile (Chapter 9), refer to the predicaments and crucial importance of teachers and teacher education for the improvement of education in the region, an issue that is also discussed by Guiomar Namó de Mello in her chapter

on curriculum reform in Brazil (Chapter 5). Vaillant analyses in detail the issues relating to the teaching profession in Uruguay, making use of the results from a comparative survey carried out in seven Latin American countries. Ávalos describes the different programmes implemented in Chile to improve the quality of the teacher profession since the 1990s. In spite of significant achievements, not found in any other country in the region, she is critical of the focus on quantifiable performance indicators and the use of competitive funding to induce improvement and of incentives to attract highly performing school leavers into the profession, leaving aside the issues related to the substantive contents of teacher education. She concludes by saying that the real conditions that make for better teaching and teacher applicants have not yet been fully addressed.

As the number of school teachers in public education increased, teachers tended to get unionized and developed political orientations and attitudes reflecting the low recognition and loss of prestige they perceived in their careers, blaming society, or the governments, for the daily difficulties they found in their jobs (Oliveira and Schwartzman, 2002). Fabricia de Andrade Ramos and Mauricio Blanco Cossío (Chapter 3) refer to the resistance of Bolivia's teachers' unions to the implementation of education policies that could limit their political power, a situation that exists in all other countries and helps to explain the efforts of governments to build political consensus for their policies while avoiding more controversial issues.

Curriculum, teaching methods and ICT

The education culture in South America is mostly dominated by a mixture of theories about the oppressive nature of the conventional schools, inspired by Bourdieu and Foucault, with the libertarian, constructivist pedagogies inspired in the writings of Paulo Freire and Emilia Ferreiro, combined sometimes with the contributions of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky of the 1920s, but very little beyond that. Guiomar Namó de Mello (Chapter 5) argues that the old dichotomy between the content-based, traditional education and the student-centred, constructivist approaches that are typical of the New School (which are far from new, having their origins in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey, Édouard Claparède and Adolphe Ferrière, also from the earlier twentieth century) has been superseded by the competence-based approach that is prevalent today in most developed economies, in which students are stimulated to acquire the

knowledge and skills necessary to learn and make use of their knowledge to solve problems in real life. She shows that, although this new perspective has already been incorporated in Brazil in the education law of 1988, it was never implemented – in part for ideological reasons, and in part for the lack of proper leadership and coordination between the national, state and local administrations, as shown also by Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro in Chapter 4. Another issue raised by Mello is Brazil's inability to deal with vocational education. The early legislation of the 1940s created separate tracks for academic and different types of vocational education, which never took hold. In the 1970s the military decided to force all secondary schools to become vocational, a policy that failed and was cancelled some years later. In the legislation today, vocational education is an option in addition to the academic track, which is already overwhelmed by fifteen or more mandatory disciplines the students are required to learn, in spite of the prevailing constructivist and anti-curriculum ideologies among the educators (Schwartzman, 2011; Schwartzman, 2013). The resistance to a national curricular core, vocational education and competence-based pedagogies is often expressed as a principled defence of freedom of education against the state and the encroachment of the market, but in practice is a movement to keep the teachers and schools free from external oversight, which ultimately leads to the prevalence of bureaucratic formalisms over content, leaving the children poorly educated.

In the same vein, João Batista Araujo e Oliveira (Chapter 6) looks at the alarming rates of functional illiteracy among Brazilian students, and attributes it, to a large extent, to the wrong approaches adopted by the country's education authorities in literacy, eschewing the established international evidence supporting phonic methods in favour of vague constructivist approaches that confuses learning to read with understanding contents of what is being read. Through a careful analysis of the country's main official documents, he concludes, ironically, that 'Brazilian students cannot read because government policies – especially the recommendations of the Ministry of Education and the Schools of Education associated with it – have been successfully implemented'. His analysis also shows evidence demonstrating that, when proper, structured approaches to literacy are implemented, there are good results, pointing the way to move forward.

In recent years, all countries in the region introduced new information and communication technologies in their schools. Denise Vaillant (Chapter 18) describes Uruguay's programme to deliver one laptop for every child and teacher in the country's schools, which was started in 2007. Different assessments have

shown that this investment has not led to significant improvements in teaching practices and student achievements. Similar studies in other countries show that, if the school works well, the introduction of ICT can have positive effects in its performance, but is far from having an independent impact if the schools perform poorly (Barrera-Osorio and Linden, 2009; Beuermann et al, 2013; Sorj and Lissovsky, 2011).

Multicultural and bilingual education

There is a clear perception, in all countries in the region, regarding the strong correlation between the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the children's families and their achievements in education, as documented for Peru by Santiago Cueto, Juan León and Alejandra Miranda (Chapter 17). There is also a growing awareness that these differences start to affect the children at the very early ages, leading to a growing emphasis on the importance of pre-school education and care, as discussed in detail by Marina Camargo Abello for Colombia (Chapter 13).

In many countries, these differences in achievement are also strongly related with cultural and linguistic differences, leading to several attempts to introduce multicultural or bilingual education. Fabricia de Andrade Ramos and Mauricio Blanco Cossío (Chapter 3) describe the opposition that has existed for a long time in Bolivia between the traditional intent to compel the indigenous population to be educated in Spanish, thereby assimilating them into the dominant culture, and the efforts to educate them in their own language and culture, enhancing their own traditions and values. The issue of multicultural education is present and relevant for all countries with large native populations, including Peru, Chile, Ecuador and Paraguay; and is also present to some degree in Brazil, but, in Bolivia, it was brought to the very centre of the country's political organization, when it changed the country's name to 'Plurinational State of Bolivia'. The authors discuss in detail the current education legislation in the country, fully based on the rhetoric of plurinationalism and decolonization and in favour of the culturally oppressed indigenous minorities, and compare it with the previous legislation of 1994, which also gave relevance to the need for multicultural education, but in a very different political context, less centralized and more open to local variations and experimentation. They argue that this rhetoric, although powerful in political terms, does not reflect the actual reality of Bolivian society, which is today highly urbanized and with most people in the country speaking either Spanish or a combination of Spanish and one of the

native languages, mostly Quechua or Aymara. They show also that, beyond the rhetoric, the education policies in Bolivia have been shaped mostly by the political conflicts and interests of trades unions, political parties and political groups, and have seldom been actually implemented, with little or no impact in the life of the population.

In spite of its importance and its presence in the education legislation of many countries, there is little empirical evidence of the way multicultural education has been implemented and its effects. A case study of a programme of multicultural education in Puno, Peru, showed that the government did not have fully qualified teachers and materials to teach in the native languages, and that very often the population preferred to be educated in Spanish, as this provided them with an instrument for social mobility. They conclude that the programme has apparently been successful only in the communities that have decided to enhance their languages and cultures and have done so through concrete actions (Cueto and Secada, 2003).

Most of the articles in this book deal with primary education, which is considered, for good reasons, as the foundation for everything else. However, as the issues of primary education are being tackled – and they are, to a limited extent – secondary education looms as a major obstacle in allowing the countries to come closer to what is being called today a knowledge-intensive society. This is the central concern of Martha Laverde Toscano's contribution on Colombia (Chapter 11). The problems of secondary education are, in many ways, similar to those that affect primary education: lack of well-qualified teachers, lack of appropriate installations and teaching resources, poor management of the schools, and so on. In addition, however, there are two main problems that are specific to secondary education. The first is that the students are adolescents that have more freedom to remain or drop out than when they were in elementary school, and, in fact, in most countries they tend to leave school in large numbers, never completing their degrees, which today are required for most jobs in the industrial and service sectors. The second is that there is a huge gap between what these adolescents want and can do, considering the limitations of their previous education, and the curriculum offered in the schools, which tend to be formalistic and academic in the bad sense of the word. The traditional solution to this situation was to divide secondary education into academic and vocational streams, the first to prepare students to enter higher education, and the second to prepare them for work. In practice, vocational education tended to become some kind of second-class education for poor children, which led to the opposite trend, as in Brazil today, where all students are required to complete the academic

stream to get a secondary school degree, to which they can add a vocational qualification, either at the same time or in subsequent years. A similar trend can be seen in Ecuador, where a highly stratified upper secondary system that included one academic track and four vocational tracks gave way in 2011 to the new *Bachillerato General Unificado* (BGU), which is now the only one available. The BGU, whose declared goal is that all students will be prepared for exercising citizenship, for entering the workplace and entrepreneurship, and for continuing learning, offers a common core of academic subjects obligatory to all students, although they can still choose an extra academic or vocational focus. One of the main arguments for unification, both in Brazil and Ecuador, is that it is more democratic, but, in practice, it becomes highly stratified, since only the students able to attend the best private or the few selective high-quality public institutions have any chance of actually entering a good-quality university for a well-established career. The problem of how to provide secondary education to a highly differentiated population is not limited to the South but affects also the developed economies. The preferred solution is to create more options for the students at the secondary level, both academic and vocational, without disregarding the need to strengthen the basic skills of language, communication and quantitative reasoning, and to avoid education bottlenecks by creating multiple paths of education advancement for people with different backgrounds, competencies and interests. These issues, however, are barely starting to become part of the South American education agenda.

Conclusion

This overview of education in South America shows, on the one hand, an impressive improvement in the provision of access to basic education to most of the population in the region, compared with the extremely high rates of illiteracy of the previous generation in most countries; but, on the other hand, that all countries are still struggling to improve the quality of the education the students get, and to reduce the extreme inequities in achievement that are related to high levels of inequality that prevail also in the economy.

The national chapters show also the different attempts to deal with this situation, from working to build national education laws, agendas and plans based on political consensus to specific policies to improve the curricula, introduce new technologies, give more autonomy to local authorities, bring in (or reject) the participation of the private sector and increase the budgets for

education. One important trend, which was not considered in detail in any of the chapters, is the introduction of external assessments of education achievement, used both for diagnostics and for sorting students for entering higher education, as in Brazil and Chile. These assessments have been extremely useful for making the countries more aware of the problems of the education quality they face, and for identifying with more precision the regions, groups and subject matters more affected by these problems. On the other hand, they have yet to become useful instruments to actually promote the required transformations, and run the risk of becoming an end in themselves, which happens when preparation for the tests becomes more important than learning (Elacqua et al., 2013; Murnane and Ganimian, 2014; Schwartzman, 2013).

Perhaps the most sobering conclusion one can get from this overview is that, while international agencies, governments, political parties, teachers' unions and social movements try to put forward their education agendas, sometimes reaching consensus, investing more money and writing up well-intended legislation, this is seldom followed, as it should be, by changes in the classrooms, where teachers meet students every day and where education, in the proper sense of the world, does or does not take place. Perhaps it is just a matter of time – cultural changes do not happen quickly, and may eventually materialize if the broad policies are correct. But it is also an alert to the fact that education, to improve, has to be built from the bottom up, looking carefully at the learning processes as they take place, making use of the best possible evidence of what works and what does not, turning the schools into stimulating environments for teachers, students, their families and their local communities, and protecting them from the harassments of ideologies, party politics and government bureaucracies.

Notes

- 1 Compared with the OECD standardized scores of around 500, Chile went from 410 to 441 points in reading between 2000 and 2012, and smaller improvements in mathematics and science. There were also some improvements in Brazil in mathematics, going from 367 to 393 points between 2003 and 2012, and for Peru in reading, going from 322 in 2000 to 385 in 2012 (OECD, 2013). In the case of Brazil, the atypical improvement in mathematics seems to be related to changes in the age composition of the student sample (Klein, 2011).
- 2 Data from the Unesco Institute for Statistics, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/BrowseEducation.aspx> [accessed 9 September 2014].

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