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EDITORIAL

BASIC EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND THE CHALLENGES OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Cecilia Braslavsky

It is usually agreed that enjoying the benefits of technical progress, avoiding its paradoxes and strengthening and modernizing ethics and politics in the context of globalization requires skills such as learning how to learn, to be, to do and to live together (Delors, 1996). It is also commonly recognized that those who do not possess these skills will be doomed to lead a life of extreme poverty (Reich, 1991; Rifkin, 1996; Gorz, 1998).

Imparting these skills, however, requires more years and a higher standard of basic education than in the past.

Conceptually speaking, basic education is not in fact the same as primary education. It refers to the type of education needed for a better quality of life and for lifelong learning in an increasingly complex and challenging world. Basic education conveys the notion of a 'base', a 'foundation', a 'construction and take-off platform'.

If so, the number of years available in old-fashioned primary schooling is not sufficient to build this base.

On the other hand, improving the quality of basic education in this century implies aiming for a new type of education altogether rather than an improved version of the education meted out in former centuries. The theory that the extra time needed for basic education may be gained just by expanding the secondary education inherited in the twenty-first century is debatable.

Schools with rigid timetables, overloaded curricula with thirteen or fourteen subjects a year centred on information that students have learn by rote, forty-minute lessons and uniform content for many different personalities do not offer suitable conditions, for instance, for learning to learn. If, in addition, the physical and didactic infrastructure of the education system is inadequate or poor, the situation will be even worse.

Families and the young people themselves are aware of both aspects. In order to obtain more time for basic training, they tend to opt to stay on in the education system, making a great effort in many parts of the world, with considerable success, to take advantage of the type of education that is on offer nowadays, namely secondary education. This effort is unsuccessful only in places where the process of deinstitutionalization (Castells, 1997) is extremely serious and affects the educational system as well. In those situations, the youngsters tend to go for education provided by families or by parallel community networks of public and private schools.

However, the same families and youngsters, who are aware that a different type of education is needed—not the same as before or a ‘warmed up’ version—and who participate in secondary education where it is most developed, are showing growing dissatisfaction, which expresses itself in different ways. One of these is the violence of young people among themselves or directed against the principals and teaching staff of secondary schools. This violence is often met with increased supervision and even armed control.

A look back at the origins and main milestones in the expansion of secondary education may help us to understand this apparent paradox: access to secondary education is sought where it is not certain to be available and it is criticized everywhere, but more so where it is already well established.

The secondary education that has been passed down to the twenty-first century appeared in Europe after a long process that started in twelfth century. Its great

expansion, which began in Europe and continued in the United States and in the progressive countries of Latin America and Asia after the Second World War, has now spread to the whole world.

Seeking access to secondary education is a way of trying to obtain more years of basic education and to become part of the virtuous circle of social and economic development. It is a response to the perception of a world developing at two speeds and to the risk that those who fail to obtain more and better education will fall by the wayside.

The expansion of secondary education is, in turn, a response to this search for access and belonging, and very often—although not always—it amounts to a reflex response or the outcome of unsatisfactory bargaining with acquired rights.

It is a reflex response whenever it fails to challenge the institutional pedagogic model of secondary education. It tends to be forgotten that, as a form of education, it was developed in Europe on the basis of medieval institutions to meet the requirements of the modern industrial world. No thought is given to the fact that it expanded in conservative societies full of certainties and governed by powerful nation states.

It is an unsatisfactory response insofar as it does not give pride of place to a vision of the future and of the common good. In these cases, sectors with acquired rights linked to the current model will succeed in impeding its transformation (Meirieu, 2000).

But that modern industrial world was replaced by the dynamic of the knowledge society, and the certainties of the post-war generations gave way to feelings of uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1999). Also the power of the regulating nation states has had to absorb the rise of local authorities and the weight of supranational organizations. In this new context, secondary education is losing its meaning.

In this new situation, the question arises as to whether the young people who are fighting so hard to prolong their years of basic education in places where there is still no secondary education should really be offered the same old model.

The origins of the different types of secondary school lie in the arts faculties of medieval universities. Those faculties were set up to prepare entrance to other faculties, particularly law and theology (Durkheim, 1992). Entry to the art faculties was an alternative and not a sequel to parish schools or—at a later stage municipal schools—which then turned into primary schools. Technical schools and certain

aspects of vocational training in some European countries originated in the medieval system of apprenticeships. Entry to that system as well was an alternative and not a sequel to popular educational establishments for poor children.

The present system of secondary education, with its variations in different countries (such as *liceos* or technical schools) took shape partly alongside the tripartite economy (with its primary, secondary and tertiary sectors) of the first half of the twentieth century, and partly as a result of later reforms aimed at improving the quality of basic education against a background of economic growth, social redistribution of wealth, democratization and a concern for social integration and cohesion.

After the end of the Second World War, secondary education underwent considerable changes in Europe, the United States and other progressive countries, as a result of either public policies or institutional innovations or a combination of the two. For some analysts, those changes were a success, but not for most.

The thought then comes to mind—somewhat provocatively—that perhaps it might be time to ‘abolish’ secondary education altogether as a model, and to set up instead a new type of education system for young people, which would be better suited to their need for more years of basic education to train the key skills required in the twenty-first century. If that case, the countries furthest behind in their ability to cater for the educational needs of their young people could find themselves before a unique opportunity.

In countries that lack secondary education there are clearly not the same barriers to the transformation of the old established form. Those countries can think in terms of horizons, prospects, openings and opportunities for innovation. Of course, inventing such a new model would be no easy task. But if it comes about, we might witness unexpected advances in the processes of economic and social development and ethical and political progress.

The articles that make up the Open File on Secondary Education Reform in this issue of *Prospects* alternatively highlight current trends in the expansion or regression of secondary education, their interpretation in the light of the processes of economic and social development, and efforts to introduce change.

We have to go on exploring all innovations that may open the way to new models and the policies that go with them. In societies where work at home assisted by the new technologies has been spreading just as much as in those suffering from a

shortage of job opportunities for young people, it is essential to create new models of educational care and social integration for those youngsters. Probably all that can be said for sure about such models is that they must exclude no one, that they must give due attention to every individual and that they must be served by adult professionals who are prepared to assume educational responsibility.

The sources that could be used for these innovations could include the critical appraisals and processes of reform and transformation of secondary education occurring in many of the countries where it was first developed, experiments with non-formal youth training, labour training schemes for beginners joining co-operatives and enterprises, and the dynamics of self-learning for young people using television and the new communication and information technologies.

The articles in other sections of this issue offer some analytical and prospective views that confirm the need to create new educational models not only for young people but for others as well

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