
OVERVIEW:

SECONDARY EDUCATION

AT THE CROSSROADS

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**The importance of secondary education
in a changing world**

As countries make strenuous efforts to achieve universal literacy and primary-level education for all, while at the same time expanding and improving the quality of their systems of tertiary education, for many nations secondary education has become the weakest link in the education chain.

As the UNESCO *World education report* (2000) on 'the right to education' clearly demonstrates, primary education has expanded significantly in many developing countries since the 1950s, and this has resulted in a significant increase in gross enrolment in secondary education. However, as access to secondary education has expanded, its overall quality has often been in decline as resources have been stretched thin and systems have become more inefficient.

There is widespread agreement as to the need for a fundamental re-thinking of the role and place of secondary education as part of the re-engineering of education systems, since most countries recognize the priority of secondary education,

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not only as an indispensable link in the whole education system but also as an area of particular importance to youth. At the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, the matter of what happens after primary education was raised as being an important issue in a number of regions where secondary education is now regarded as forming part of basic education. At the Dakar Forum, a Roundtable on 'After primary education: what?' discussed the reform of the secondary education curriculum.

In fact, the education of adolescents is a matter which is of considerable concern to developed and developing countries alike. For instance, in a 1999 study the OECD put the proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds not attending school and not employed at 19% in the United Kingdom, 14% in Italy and 13% in Spain.

In addition, major regional and international conferences, such as the 1998 UNESCO-ACEID International Conference on Education, on 'Secondary Education and Youth at the Crossroads', have repeatedly stressed the urgent need to upgrade, diversify and expand education at the secondary level in order to respond to the consequences of the expansion of basic education and to challenges posed by rapid changes occurring in society and the world of work.

Overview of current issues and concerns regarding secondary education

A review of the research literature on secondary education reveals that a number of key issues and concerns are emerging regarding the renewal and diversification of secondary education and the education of youth, which many countries are now seeking to address. Put briefly, these are:

1. *Secondary education for all?* As was stressed at the recent World Education Forum in Dakar, in an increasing number of countries basic education is being redefined to include secondary education, at least at the middle school (junior secondary) level. For many, secondary education is now regarded as part of basic education and EFA.
2. *Expanding access:* As countries achieve universal primary education, there is pressure to increase opportunities for access to post-primary education for the larger numbers of individuals completing primary education. World-wide, in terms of enrolment ratios, secondary education is the fastest-growing sector of formal education.
3. *Reducing drop-out and repeater rates:* In many countries, rising enrolments are accompanied by an increase in academic failure, as evidenced by high rates of repeating and drop-out. For example, every year almost a third of pupils in Latin America repeat a grade, which wastes valuable human and financial resources. Action is being taken to overcome this problem through such means as the reform of teacher training, financial assistance to students and their families, and innovative experiments in group work, team teaching and the use of the new information and communication technologies.
4. *Equity:* There is an increasing emphasis on ensuring that all sections of soci-

ety, regardless of their gender, socio-economic background, race, ethnicity, cultural characteristics or geographical location, have an opportunity for access to a high-quality secondary education. One reason is that if some of those who successfully complete primary education are denied access to a high-quality secondary education, equality of opportunity and equity will be denied.

5. *Quality assurance:* All are concerned to ensure that expanding access to secondary education is not at the expense of the quality of programmes. In fact, there is an increasing realization that access and quality are different sides of the same coin, since if access to primary education is expanded without this education being relevant and of a high quality, high drop-out rates will remain, which in turn undermines the move to expand access and reduces the internal efficiency of systems. In addition, it is important to develop effective systems for monitoring and evaluating the learning outcomes achieved, both to measure the success of the programmes mounted in achieving their aims and also to provide feedback information that can contribute to improving the programmes offered. This monitoring and evaluation is equally important from the macro (systems) level through to that of the micro (individual classroom) level. Quality assurance also draws attention to teacher effectiveness, and the importance of offering a reward structure that enables the most talented and appropriate individuals to be recruited into the profession, and for them to be provided with cutting-edge, career-long professional development.
6. *Importance of good teachers:* Countries believe that teachers are the cornerstone of educational development and that (as the Delors Report puts it) 'good schools require good teachers'. Teachers are at the forefront of the process of educational reform, since the quality and effectiveness of any education system ultimately depends on the quality and nature of the interaction that occurs between learners and their teachers. A major problem that exists in many countries concerns attracting the most suitable, talented people into secondary school teaching, since those who have the qualifications and qualities to become good secondary schoolteachers are precisely the ones who are most in demand by other industries, as they are likely to be university graduates or to have other post-secondary qualifications. To enable the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of secondary education to occur, there is a demand for greater numbers of high-quality recruits to the teaching profession. Much more therefore needs to be done to provide incentives to attract (and keep) suitable individuals in secondary school teaching.
7. *Improving the relevance and effectiveness of the content of secondary education:* Many believe there is a need to improve the relevance of the content of secondary education with regard to curriculum and teaching methods to accommodate the changing needs of society, individuals and groups to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The curriculum should be enriched and brought up to date so as to reflect the increasing globalization of phenomena, the need for intercultural understanding and the use of science to foster sustainable human development. Another important issue being addressed concerns

the content and approaches of secondary education not exclusively (or mainly) being seen as a preparation for those who plan to go on to university, but also being designed to adequately meet the non-academic needs of those who do not have higher education aspirations.

With regard to *curriculum content* it is widely believed that more needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of the bridge between education and the world of work, including a greater stress on enterprise education and what has come to be called 'the vocationalization of secondary education'. For example, marginalized youth need short-term skills training that leads to income generation. As the Delors Report points out, vocational training also has to reconcile two divergent goals: preparation for jobs that exist at the present time and the capacity to adapt to jobs as yet not even imagined. There is also a view that curriculum content should address key social concerns and issues in areas such as civics education and also health, with particular reference to education about HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. In addition, the matter of values education is moving higher and higher up the agenda of educators around the globe, a fact which needs to be reflected in the content of secondary education. By improving the relevance of the content of secondary education it is believed that this will help to reduce the problem of student drop-out and improve both the internal and external efficiency of secondary education.

With regard to *teaching methods* it is widely held that there is a need to move away from mainly using those methods which stress teacher-centred approaches and rote learning to instead utilizing a greater repertoire of more learner-centred (and learner-friendly) teaching and learning approaches which foster the development of intelligence, creativity, lateral thinking and independent learning. Teaching approaches also need to place greater emphasis on the tools for seeking and processing knowledge, rather than on the actual knowledge itself.

8. *Utilizing most effective modalities for delivery:* There is agreement on the need to adopt a wider range of delivery systems in addition to conventional schools, to reach those who are currently unreached, such as low-income groups, those in remote areas, street children and the like. Formal education systems should be reinforced by non-formal practices and various modes of delivery, such as distance education.
9. *Effectively harnessing existing and new ICTs:* Many are exploring ways of cost-effectively utilizing the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve access to and the quality of secondary education. This is not just for those attending conventional schools and classrooms (with regard to, for example, the use of computers and the Internet) but also to harnessing the new information technologies (such as satellite communications) in a cost-effective way to reach those in remote areas who seek access to secondary education.
10. *Financial considerations:* The expansion and qualitative improvement of secondary education cannot be realized without adequate financial support and so the finance of secondary education is an issue of crucial importance.

The provision of secondary education is generally more costly than is the provision of education at the primary level (particularly where this secondary education includes technical and vocational education), and there are considerable pressures in many countries to expand the provision of secondary education. A number of matters are being considered in this regard, such as private versus public funding of secondary education, developing partnership arrangements with employers with regard to cost-sharing, and devising ways of ensuring that limited resources are put to the best possible use so as to improve the internal efficiency of secondary education.

Special importance of the Delors Report

The Report of the independent International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors et al., 1996), has special relevance for the education of youth and secondary education.

The Delors Report examines the real achievements and possibilities regarding what education (including secondary education) can and should do in preparing individuals to live in rapidly changing societies. The realities of contemporary change clearly call for new approaches to learning. The Commission addressed this issue by looking at the ultimate aims of learning and what this might mean in terms of the content and organization of schooling. It proposed that education be based on four pillars. Giving equal weight to each of these pillars would result in a substantial reorganization of the priorities of what and how we teach throughout our schools and education systems.

The authors of the Delors Report argue that young people, who are living in what for many is a turbulent, rapidly changing world, need values-oriented anchors, and the knowledge, skills and understanding that will enable them to find effective ways of coping with the tensions, pressures and contradictions that are apparent in their societies, and in their daily lives. When it comes to examining the renovation, renewal and diversification of secondary education, with particular reference to meeting the educational needs of youth, the Delors Report raises some important points and provides a helpful conceptual framework for analysing and guiding the content, organization and management of secondary education reform and the education of youth.

In Chapter 6 of the Delors Report, in a section called 'Secondary education: the crossroads of life', the authors note:

Many of the hopes and criticisms aroused by formal systems seem to focus on secondary education. On the one hand, it is often regarded as the gateway to social and economic advancement. It is accused, on the other hand, of being inegalitarian and not sufficiently open to the outside world and, generally, failing to prepare adolescents not only for higher education but also for the world of work. In addition, it is also argued that the subjects taught are irrelevant and that not enough attention is paid to the acquisition of attitudes and values. It is now generally recognised that, for economic growth to take place, a high proportion of

the population has to have received secondary education. It would thus be useful to clarify what secondary education needs to do to prepare young people for adulthood.

The view of learning as a process that continues throughout life leads us to reconsider both the content and organisation of secondary education. The requirements of the labour market create a pressure owing to which the number of years of schooling tends to increase (Delors et al., 1996, p. 125).

And later the authors of the report note:

the principle of lifelong education should open up wider possibilities of self-fulfillment and training after basic education, for example allowing adults to return to the formal system. Clearly, serious consideration of secondary education cannot be separated from thinking about the educational opportunities afforded to adults. The idea of 'education-time entitlements' that can be used throughout life can help focus policy making on the practicalities of further educational opportunities for people who interrupted schooling in youth: possibilities include study leave, recognition of skills already acquired, certification of non-formal learning experience and bridges between various educational streams.

Secondary education can thus be linked in the context of lifelong education to three major principles: diversity of courses, increased emphasis on the alternating of study and professional or social work, and attempts to improve quality (*ibid.*, p. 125-126).

The Delors Report analyses the main 'tensions' that must be balanced as countries and individuals fashion the directions of their education efforts at a time of major global change. On this matter the Commission says:

We have to confront, the better to overcome them, the main tensions that, although they are not new, will be central to the problems of the twenty-first century, namely:

- The tension between the global and the local: people need gradually to become world citizens without losing their roots and while continuing to play an active part in the life of their nation and their local community [...].
- The tension between tradition and modernity, which is part of the same problem: how can autonomy be acquired in complementarity with the free development of others and how can scientific progress be assimilated?
- The tension between long-term and short-term considerations: this is sustained by the predominance of the ephemeral and the instantaneous, in a world where an overabundance of transient information and emotions continually keeps the spotlight on immediate problems. Public opinion cries out for quick answers and ready solutions, whereas many problems call for a patient, concerted, negotiated strategy of reform.
- The tension between, on the one hand, the need for competition, and on the other, the concern for quality of opportunity. This has led us [...] to update the concept of lifelong learning so as to reconcile three forces: competition, which provides incentives; cooperation, which gives strength; and solidarity, which unites.
- The tension between the extraordinary expansion of knowledge and human beings' capacity to assimilate it.
- Last (and another perennial factor) is the tension between the spiritual and the material (*ibid.*, p. 16-18).

The body of the Report goes on to elaborate implications of these themes, and in particular talks about balancing the following polarities: internationalism versus local relevance; technological modernity versus cultural preservation; and individual development versus social cohesion.

Maintaining a suitable balance between these tensions is essential if we are to avoid a narrow understanding of the nature and value of secondary education. This balance is essential if we are to avoid reducing the contribution of education to utilitarian ends alone, as if its main role were merely to provide skills for employment or to enable citizens to become involved, however passively, in the political life of the community. But secondary education should be much more than skills training or civics: it should be concerned with the development and empowerment of the total human person. Such a holistic understanding of education is summarized by the Delors Commission when they cite the four pillars of education referred to earlier.

It is regarded as important that moves to renew, diversify and reform secondary education accommodate these insightful and important messages from the Delors Report.

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The articles which appear in this Open File on 'Secondary Education Reform' deal with many of the key issues and concerns referred to here. These are currently being addressed by governments, policy makers, researchers and education practitioners alike, as they seek to strengthen and upgrade secondary education to meet the challenges and uncertainties of the future.

References

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