Overview

Latin America, defined as the region of the whole American continent where current prevailing languages are either Spanish or Portuguese, is home to almost 580 million inhabitants (2012 estimate), of whom roughly a third live in the Portuguese-Speaking Brazil. Thus defined, the region includes one country in North America, six countries in Central America, three countries in the Caribbean Sea, and ten countries in South America for a total of twenty countries which share a common historical, political and economic origin. All of them were colonies of either the Spanish or the Portuguese empire since the arrival of European expeditions in the Americas in the late XV century, up to the middle -and in the case of Cuba - late, XIX century. The nature of economic and political institutions forged during that period left an imprint of social inequality which pervades every sphere of Latin American societies. This has resulted in Latin America being the most unequal continent in the world in socioeconomic terms. Being integral parts of society, schooling systems have inherited the characteristics of the larger social context in
which they have developed. As might be expected, Latin American school systems exhibit traits such as highly SES-dependent learning outcomes in international tests such as PISA. Additional key features of Latin American schooling systems include first, a sustained increase in the attendance rate of students, which is close to 95 percent in average for the region. Second, although well below OECD averages in pupil test results in PISA, all of Latin American countries show a degree of improvement, with Argentina the only exception.

In this study about school choice, accountability and autonomy in schooling systems, nine of the twenty Latin American countries are included (from north to south): Mexico, Cuba, El Salvador, Colombia, Brazil, Perú, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Among these schooling systems, Cuba and Chile stand out. Cuba and Chile can be seen as opposite extremes: while schooling in Cuba is totally state-controlled and private education is forbidden by law, Chile’s schooling system is largely controlled by several private ventures subsidized with public funds (colegios particulares subvencionados). The panorama of school-system privatization in all of the other countries considered here lies in a middle ground between the Chilean and Cuban models, although certainly closer to Chile than to Cuba, since private schooling is not illegal in any of the remaining countries. However, no Latin-American country has, by far, a level of privatization in schooling like that of Chile.

These differences having been noted, it is worth saying that perhaps due to their common origins and historical circumstances, schooling systems in the Latin-American countries included in this study show several similarities. School choice and autonomy are both limited in the public sector, whereas they are more ample in the private sector. Accountability is weak and mostly based on inputs rather than outcomes of the education system such as pupil-learning outcomes. Overall, the region and particularly the countries in this study are facing challenging educational contexts, whether of funding, or of the need for an increased education quality that gives pupils the tools they need to succeed in life. What follows is mostly a descriptive account of some salient commonalities and differences between schooling systems in the nine countries, regarding school system structure, school choice, autonomy and accountability.

**The structure of schooling**

Regarding control of schooling systems, the Latin American region is mostly homogeneous with two exceptions: one is Cuba, where all education is state-controlled by a central office, both in curricular and administrative terms. The other case of centralized school system management is Uruguay, a small, central state in which education is managed by a special status independent state agency of government (see profile in volume 3). Curiously El Salvador, another small, central-state with almost twice the population of Uruguay, but living in a fifth of the area,
has taken the way of large countries in Latin America: progressive decentralization. The remaining schooling systems for the countries under analysis have decentralized administrative issues to different levels in its state structure. In this regard, the difference between federal and central organization does not seem to play any major role. Large federal states such as Argentina, México and Brazil, and large central states such as Colombia, Perú and Chile have transferred issues such as payroll and hiring of school related personnel to sub-national federal entities (states, or even cities or municipalities), and those entities, in some cases, have in turn transferred this authority to municipalities or even schools.

Curricular issues on the other hand, vary little in the sample of Latin American countries in this study. The most salient characteristic is centralization, i.e. all of these countries either have a national curriculum or are in the process of strengthening it. There is some variation regarding this tendency. The most centralized would be in Cuba, which has a centralized curriculum, closely monitored by its government, and Uruguay in which a special government agency supervises public and private sector education. México also has a national mandatory curriculum for both public and private schools. This national curriculum allows some state variation in order to include regional topics of interest, and thus to acknowledge the multicultural nature of the Mexican nation. Similar approaches have been implemented in countries such as Brazil, which also recognizes having a multicultural society, as well as Perú. The situation is different in countries such as Chile, Colombia, and El Salvador where either indigenous population is scarce, or its political significance neglected, or the policies for acknowledging multiculturalism are still in early stages of development. In these last three countries, there are national standards: however those national standards have the character of non-strict guidelines.

Organization of schooling systems in the nine countries in this study is very similar. All of them recognize a cycle of preschool education which typically covers from ages 3 to 5. The last year of this preschool education cycle is currently mandatory in Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay only. Then follows a mandatory cycle of basic education, typically divided in two major cycles (primary and secondary), which allows pupils to continue if they want or can, into a non- mandatory, usually two year scholastic cycle which is a pre-requisite to higher education. This duration of this last cycle is longer in México and Uruguay.

Education is recognized as a fundamental right for the people in all of these countries. The visibility of education as a paramount social building mechanism became recognized in the constitutions of these countries via constitutional reforms, or the enactment of new ones. This status for education is a tendency that arose in the region during the late XIX in the late XIX century in Argentina, and which has taken place in rest of Latin American countries since that and during the mid XX century. Universal attendance, which has been on the rise during the last 30 years
in the region, is a relatively new conquer for these countries, in comparison with its European counterparts in an historical perspective.

**School choice**

With the exception of Cuba, where private education is illegal, in all the remaining countries under consideration, private education is allowed, and encouraged with diverse degrees of strength. The Chilean case would be one of a decided, long time support for private concourse in education. Chilean private-public joint ventures in schooling account for almost half of the schools (45 percent) in the country. No other Latin American country has such a high participation of private partners in schooling, particularly from low, middle-low and middle income families. Despite the higher share of private partners involved in schooling in Chile, this country in certainly not an exception. Private education in Latin America is a strong force, which has flourished perhaps due to governments’ inability to guarantee good quality education to its people without regard to their level of income.

Private-sector participation in schooling in other countries in Latin America is also noteworthy: it accounts for a third of the schools in Colombia, and a quarter of those in Argentina. Hence, private education is not necessarily an elite-business in Latin America; quite the contrary, middle, and even lower income families might have to pay for their children’s education. Although all of the Latin American states here analyzed are able to provide on the average, nine years of free education to their children, international test results seem to show that the quality of public education is low, with the sole exception of Cuba. As in many countries around the world, there is also a conspicuous market of highly exclusive private schools where the country elites are educated. Typically those are bilingual, international schools, sponsored by governments of countries such as the United States, France, Germany or the United Kingdom.

Private schooling in Latin America can be either run by for-profit or non-profit organizations. The Catholic Church has played a foremost role in education systems across the region, aimed at every kind of household income. The progressive secularization of Latin American countries has allowed for a more ample offer of organizations participating in the dynamic sector or private education in the region.

As for the choice families have to educate their own children, what is known as home schooling in the United States, the situation in Latin America varies between illegality and indifference. Home Schooling is explicitly forbidden by law in Cuba, of course; in Brazil it was deemed illegal by Constitutional Court ruling (see chapter on Brazil, Volume 3); in Argentina Home-Schooling is also deemed illegal and it is only allowed in exceptional health circumstances; as in El Salvador, there is an explicit
provision in the law that requires parents to enroll their children in schools. In the other countries here considered, Home schooling is a minor issue whose legality or illegality has not been addressed by authorities, nor seems to be a major social concern. It does exist de facto as there are known cases of students who, despite having been outside the formal school system, manage to enter higher education via special validation tests. This is the case of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay.

As discussed in the overview, socio-economic inequalities in Latin-American societies have influenced all spheres of social life, including of course education and schooling systems in particular. School choice is thus severely affected by family income in most Latin American countries in this study, with the sole exception of Cuba where families are assigned to state schools disregarding income level. The situation of Latin American countries in this study is that families are assigned to schools by geographical proximity criteria, severely diminishing choice as families are effectively limited to whatever schools they have in their surroundings. This is the usual case for families whose income does not allow them to access good quality private education, hence having to rely on state education.

Chile’s highly privatized-school system offers a unique panorama of choice for families, which has not been free of criticism. On the one hand this system has allowed for an increased diversity of school-choice for families who otherwise would have to choose within a highly homogeneous pool of state-schools, as is the case in mostly all other Latin American countries. On the other hand, the participation of private partners in schooling in Chile has introduced the chance of discrimination via fees to some families, leading to a degree of segregation among low SES families which is often seen in other Latin American school systems at a much lower scale, and usually between high and low-income households. Chile and Cuba cases aside, family income is the main factor determining school choice for Latin American families of the countries here considered.

This fact further contributes to the perpetuation of inequality in Latin American societies. As access to public, high quality education is not an actual universal right for every citizen disregarding his origins or income, education is not always a path for human development. Particularly it is not for lower, lower middle and middle income households which cannot afford tuition of a private institution. As the access to quality education becomes a privilege instead of a right, the achievement gap between the minority who can afford quality education and the majority who cannot increases. Paradoxically, the only state which seems to attain satisfactory learning outcomes for all of its pupils is Cuba, well known for its sui generis political regime.

**Autonomy**

School autonomy, understood as the capacity of schools and school stakeholders to
determine what would be taught in their schools and in which way, is somewhat restricted in the nine countries in this chapter. National curriculums defining common sets of academic areas and standards of performance are a common theme in these countries. The strength with which these curricula are enforced varies amongst countries. Although Cuba -- the foremost example of curriculum centralization -- does indeed have a National Curriculum, it also encourages communities to be actively involved in their schools. Mexico, which also has a national curriculum, requires all of its schools, whether private or public, to follow such curriculum with only minor room for each federal state to include contents regarding its particular history and geography. This context allows for little variation regarding the identity each particular school should have.

However, in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Perú, schools are required by law to define a sort of individual navigation chart; a document that defines the particular orientation of the school, by taking into account its particular circumstances and context. The document, which is called just the same in Colombia and Perú (Educational School Project), constitutes the basis for defining a distinctive character in schools. In Colombia, for example, participation of the community in building this project is required by law, in such way that schooling, under its orientation, becomes more pertinent and well-adjusted to community needs and expectations.

This is not a particularity of Colombia, but a common tendency in this group of countries. School autonomy is therefore not only protected but encouraged by law. In practical terms, however, the variety of schools in the public sector tends to be minimal, despite legal provisions for individuality and character distinctiveness. In the case of Uruguay, for example, close follow up by a special education agency of the government results in a very homogeneous offer of schools, even in the private sector, since curricula are defined on a national basis. Colombian schools in the public system tend to be less diverse in terms of school distinctive character than their private counterparts; however this tendency is greater in urban than in rural areas. Brazil and Perú are the countries in this sample where multiculturalism has had more profound influence in school distinctiveness, resulting in special educational projects for African-American and indigenous populations.

The public-private sector divide in schooling in Latin-America can also show its influence regarding school distinctiveness. Whereas the degree of variation in the public sector in the region is high, having countries with varying degrees of public school autonomy, that for private education is rather similar: distinctiveness in the private sector for these countries is high. Therefore, the most varied educational offer for families in these countries is in the private sector. The principle of freedom of education and provisions safeguarding the right of private schools to define their own school projects are common in these countries. As a result of this greater diversity of school character leads to the greater income-bound choice of Latin-American
families. There is a wide variety of international, religious and secular private schools which allow, for the families who are able to pay for them, selection of the particular education set of values, skills or social context in which they want their children’s education to take place.

Private schools, on their side, also exert influence as to who becomes member of their community. It is a common practice for private schools in Latin America to have in place one or several mechanisms to select which families they accept. These mechanisms include fees, of course, but can also include entrance tests and family interviews. On the other hand, the egalitarian spirit which is present in many Latin-American laws does not allow, and actually forbids, such practices in public schooling. Public schools are not allowed to select their students, or to discriminate among pupils in any way. They are under legal obligation to provide special needs students with appropriate support for their schooling.

Another area where school distinctiveness in Latin America is limited is that of teacher staffing, the autonomy schools have to appoint teachers according to their mission, values and academic standards. As in many countries around the world, public-sector schools do not have a say regarding what teachers are going to become members of their teams; schools can only report what teachers they lack, if any. School-system staffing systems are designed in such way that teachers are selected, generally via a merit-concourse, to be appointed as public school teachers. New teachers are appointed to their positions in accordance to the demands of the system. Once teachers are appointed in their teaching positions they typically enter a tenure-like system, which grants them stability and permanence, disregarding their performance to any extent.

There are special undergraduate programs of study aimed at preparing schoolteachers. Usually public teachers come from this kind of programs. However, there is legislation allowing professionals other than teachers to enter the teaching profession in most of the countries discussed in this study, the only exception being Brazil.

This is not the case in the private sector, which has traditionally employed professionals other than trained teachers for teaching jobs. Staffing in the private sector schools also works differently than in the public sector. Very much the same as in other private sector organizations, private schools select which teachers become or cease to be members of their communities. Permanence of appointed teachers is discretionary to internal criteria of schools and is subject to common law; there are no special statutory rights for private teachers as there are in the public sector.

Requirements to become a teacher in Latin America are not as demanding as in other professions, i.e. academic selectivity for entering teacher training programs is low compared to other professions such as engineering, law or medicine. As recruiting
top performing candidates seems to be a necessary feature for a successful school system, at least in terms of student learning. Countries such as Cuba, Chile and Brazil, and more recently Colombia, have started to implement policies in order to attract more academically qualified candidates to enter the teaching profession via special state sponsored scholarships. At the same time, alternative programs to enter the teaching profession are gradually taking place in several Latin American countries. Teach for All, a network of programs which recruit top-performing just graduated college students in top-performing universities in order to become teachers in the first two years of their careers, has a very active presence in Latin America. The pioneer program in the United States, Teach for America is in its twentieth year. Similar initiatives are under place in several of the Latin American countries in this study: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, México and Perú.

**Accountability for school quality**

There is a common ground for school accountability in the Latin American countries here discussed. It is based on inputs for both types of schooling (private and public). Being based in inputs mostly refers to requirements for proper school functioning. Schools, private or public, are subject to inspection to determine if they are compliant or not with criteria to properly take care of students. This includes aspects such as adequacy of facilities, a curriculum in accordance with regional or national laws and regulations, appropriate pupil to teacher ratios, and of course, number of enrolled pupils. Numbers of enrolled pupils are of central importance to input-based accountability systems in schools because state transfers of funds for private schools, or even for mixed, public-private ventures such as in the Chilean case, depend directly on those figures.

Output-based accountability on the contrary, differs widely in public and private sector schooling, being much more important in the private sector, where in order to retain pupils, schools need to show added-value results to parents in order to preserve their status. These added-value outcomes usually are in the form of national scholastic tests at the end of high school or in other intermediate grades, which are in place in all of the Latin American countries in this chapter. National scholastic tests in reading and math are not being used as an accountability measure for governments in regard to public sector schooling. Uses of those results are mostly diagnostic in nature, and serve to inform public policy about education quality.

There are special government agencies which closely monitor student performance, and Latin American students often participate in international comparative tests, excepting those in Cuba. The results they obtain are far below average in all academic areas. Latin American comparative experiences seem to show a similar panorama, the only exception being the exceptionally high results of Cuban pupils, which score far above the Latin-American average in science, mathematics and reading.
Unlike in the US, where accountability for student outcomes can take the form of negative actions for schools such as closures, in the Latin American countries considered here such measures do not occur. Unions have in general, fiercely rejected any kind of negative accountability consequences either for schools or teachers. However, positive reinforcement for schools based on student outcomes has been put in place in Chile and Mexico.

In the case of Cuba, a strict both input- and outcome-based accountability system has been in place since 1989. It relies on a number of approaches, including both qualitative and quantitative tests scores, both from the teachers and its students. It is remarkable how such a strict system for teacher for monitoring teacher performance, which may even include cuts in teacher’s salaries, is in place in the least free market-advocate government of the region.

Meanwhile, intense political confrontation takes place in other countries, where free-market advocates for education can only dream of an outcome-based accountability system for teachers as strict such as that of the communist regime in Cuba.

**Closing remarks**

The sample of Latin American countries discussed in this chapter gives an interesting panorama of the region in terms of school choice, autonomy, and accountability in schooling systems. The anomalous behavior of Cuba, a political regime with limited school choice and autonomy and strong outcome-based accountability systems is a case worth studying. The vastly superior quality of its pupil outcomes when compared with other Latin-American countries is the main reason this case is interesting. Average Cuban students are at least as proficient as top-performing students in other Latin American countries.6

Chile, as political opposite to Cuba in this sample also gives interesting hints about how schooling could be improved, particularly in matters of choice. The potential segregation which the Chilean system may promote is however, an issue which deserves careful consideration.

If one were to generalize on the remaining countries, one might conclude that highly unequal societies, with only input-based accountability systems and an increasingly limited school choice for families as its income decreases, configure a context for educational failure. This seems to be the case of Latin American countries. Despite increased expenditures in education, student learning as measured by international test results continues to be a very challenging issue for these countries, where universal attendance for primary education is a relatively recent achievement. Secondary and middle school enrollment continues to be an issue in these countries.
both in number of students and the quality of the education they receive. Brazil, widely recognized as having made substantial improvements regarding equality in its society, has still a long way to go in regard to educational outcomes, as is the case for the remaining countries.

Limited accountability and school choice dependent on family resources, while disregarding the degree of autonomy, is the summarizing statement for schooling in Latin America. Neither high-autonomy systems like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, nor low-autonomy like México, El Salvador or Uruguay seem to be transforming educational opportunity for those in the society who need the most quality education. Latin American societies should consider structural changes in their political and economic structure which allow for the strengthening of education systems in such way that schooling promotes human development for all of its citizens instead of perpetuating current social inequalities.
Endnotes


2 López & Perry, 2008.

3 Similar to Charter Schools in the U.S.

4 Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2008.

5 Barber & Mourshed, 2007

6 UNESCO, 2008
References


OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary.

