

## **EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS: EDUCATIONAL INDICES: CENTRAL AMERICA**

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### **Summary**

A brief historical background is provided to show some very broad tendencies in the history of the South American continent. The division into spheres of influence in post-Columbian times may explain the main tongues spoken in the continent. A brief discussion presents Central America and its main problems. One of the major problems is inequity, as different populations have to face huge differences in school offers and success. A discussion about wealth and education is presented.

### **1. Historical Background**

Central America and the Caribbean is a region that was originally divided into different areas of influence in post-Columbian times. Spain and Portugal signed an agreement at the end of the fifteenth century that established the land east of a certain parallel as Portuguese, and all land west of it as Spanish. This line proved to be in the middle of Brazil, which in fact was colonized by Portugal. All other regions of the continent were thereafter under Spanish influence. However, Central America and the Caribbean were colonized by several countries in colonial times (Britain, the Netherlands, France, etc.). The slave market flourished in the region up to the explosion of civil revolutions. In San Domingos, which produced 80% of the world's coffee at the end of the eighteenth century, slaves rebelled against their Dutch rulers in one of the major popular revolutions in history.

The history of Central America and the Caribbean as a colonial land is no different from that of South America. The region was cut into spheres of colonial influence and transformed into a place for the generation of wealth that was sent to Europe. Independence wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century were the baptism of republican political experience in almost all small countries, reflecting the extremely diverse mosaic of cultures of the region. The influence of the United States in the region

has been clear since the war against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. The beginning of the twentieth century saw another international dispute in the region, as the United States, France, and Britain worked together on a link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans

In the second half of the twentieth century, during the post-WW II period, the region experienced major economic expansion with increased production capacities allied with increased exporting potential, particularly in the primary sector. Between 1945 and 1980 the gross national product (GNP) more than doubled in the area, as did the population. Societies underwent a process of diversification that created an even more complex stratification and distribution of wealth. Concentration of property, land, and economic power accompanied a process of expansion of urban areas, which concentrated segments of the middle classes with political influence alongside huge numbers of poor people with little hope. These processes were seldom products of democratically elected governments, as many dictatorships were supported by and contributed to leading economic groups and political lobbies.

The Cuban revolution, in 1959, brought an unexpected ingredient to the geopolitical balance of the region, especially in the context of the Cold War. The Cuban context represented a clear shift in the history of the continent, showing tendencies not found in other places, especially in education and health care. All that is said in this article about events after 1959 excludes Cuba, for in many respects it was unique after that year. Moreover, the Cuban revolution represented a difference in the way the region was regarded. Before Cuba became a well-known island, the countries comprising Central America were not well defined and the Caribbean was not always clearly included in many classifications and world divisions (in this article, Mexico is regarded as part of Central America, as well as the Caribbean; the word “continent” in this context, does not exclude the Caribbean).

In social terms, the last thirty years of the twentieth century in Central America and the Caribbean showed clear fluctuations. The 1970s saw a tendency of improving social indices, which unfortunately was reversed in the 1980s. The 1990s saw another reversion, which brought new hopes, although modest, of again improving social indices. It is important to take into account this broad picture when analyzing educational data in general. For instance, it is common to find enthusiastic reports about improvements in the educational background of populations in the 1990s, but what is generally omitted is that the previous decade experienced a severe deterioration on all social, and economic, indices. What should be kept in mind is that in the 1990s the main target was to recover what had already been achieved twenty years before, an objective not always reached. Not surprisingly, the 1980s are called “the lost decade”; these are ten years that many people do not like to remember.

During the 1970s, all Latin American countries had a modest albeit significant reduction in the proportion of people below the poverty line. Population growth in the same period brought a not so clear picture, as the increase of absolute numbers may have shadowed the reduction in relative numbers. In the 1980s, however, this tendency showed a different perspective, and the relative numbers of people below the poverty line increased dramatically, reversing all the progress achieved in previous years. Data

from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, or CEPAL) indicate that the number of poor people in Latin America increased in both relative and absolute terms: in 1980 they were 41% of the population (136 million); in 1986, 43% (170 million); and in 1989, 44% (183.2 million). In other words, in less than 10 years more than 40 million people were added to the group of those who could not have access to the most basic public services, such as education and health, and a livelihood. Recent data show that this tendency has not changed and prospects for the near future are not optimistic in this regard.

In the 1980s, public expenditure on education in Latin America dropped on average 25%, with serious consequences for the schooling of populations, especially the poorest. It is still possible to observe the effects of that reduction, which was reversed in the following decade. In fact, the mean public expenditure on education per person for Latin America in 1980 was US\$164, but by 1989 it had dropped to about US\$118. The 1980s continued a tendency that prevailed throughout Latin America from the mid 1960s. There was a relative decrease in public expenditure at the primary level while there was an increase of public expenditure at the university level. In some sense, this means that those who earn more received more educational services from the state, a perverse situation that reinforced social inequity. In the 1990s, educational indices improved despite the fact that quality has been earmarked as a new border to be extended. International economic groups and companies targeted local markets, and as a result competitive standards have been elected as new achievements for the future. As a rule, there are signs of efforts to improve access to education, as well as efforts to further improve efficiency and quality. National assessment systems, educational attainment targets, and teacher training programs have been set up in several countries, reflecting recommendations of international funding agencies, such as the World Bank. In the past, these organizations have frequently provided funds for investment in higher education, but in the 1990s there was a sudden change, focusing on basic education and establishing elementary teachers' pre-service and in-service.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Nelio Bizzo** has a degree in biology (1981), and postgraduate qualifications in biology and education. He has been involved with science education since 1988 at the School of Education of the University of São Paulo where he is full professor and vice-dean. He was coordinator of the official assessment of science textbooks in the period 1996–2002, and during that time he originated a series of articles and academic theses. He has taken part in a number of educational projects, such as National Parameters for Science, official assessment of science textbooks, educational policies and research on science education. In 1998 he won a national prize for services to public understanding of science given by the National Council for Science and Technology (CNPq). He was president of the Brazilian Society for Biological Education (1997–2002), and has acted as consulting editor of educational journals such as *Interchange* and *Journal of Biological Education*. He is member of the Brazilian National Council of Education, where he is vice-president (CEB/CNE). He was elected deputy chair of the International Organization for Science and Technology Education (IOSTE) for the period 2002–2004.