

Latin America is working its way to its own answers as to the characteristics of its man of tomorrow . . .

Education as Management: Latin America

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THE purpose here is to examine education in Latin America as a management enterprise, dealing with characteristics such as *adequacy*, *efficiency*, *marketability*, and *quality control*. In the course of the essay these terms will take on more specific meaning.

The first step in examining an enterprise is to ask a simple question: What is the product? What is the company building or making? What service is it rendering? If I were examining the operation of an automobile factory, my answer would be fairly simple. To be sure, we must refine the description of the car—is it a luxury car with great power, speed, etc., or is it meant for simple transportation, little power, durability, etc.? Yet the fact of the matter is that most business enterprises know what they are trying to manufacture or can describe quite accurately what services they hope to render the customer.

It is precisely at this point that education encounters its greatest difficulty. Neither the producers nor the consum-

ers can agree upon what the educational product shall be. Neither the abstruse pedagogical literature nor the daily press provides a clear, concise definition of the product to be elaborated by the complex factory system we call "school." Latin America is no more fortunate than the United States in this condition.

Either the schools are expected to produce the "complete man" or they are criticized for usurping the functions of family, church, and marketplace. At the same given moment they can be condemned for being too broad or too narrow, too specific or too vague, too idealistic or too worldly.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of fully and precisely defining the educational product, there certainly are some outcomes which can be measured and against which the adequacy and efficiency of the school enterprise can be assessed. Certainly one can say that the national school systems of the Latin American countries should produce literacy. An adequate school system should

contribute literate young adults to the general population. What is the situation in Latin America?

A Monumental Failure

In Latin America, for some time now, approximately a quarter of the children eligible to go to school never attend any kind of school. Of the children who do start school, approximately one-half leave before the end of the second year of primary level, about twenty percent finish primary school, and about five percent finish secondary school. If one equates functional literacy with three or four years of schooling—and that would be minimal literacy for modern uses—it would appear that the schools are providing approximately ten percent of the product required.

Another way of looking at these facts is to conclude that in the year 1982 (when today's entering youngsters will have supposedly finished higher education) the schools will have effectively touched no more than fifteen percent of the adult population of Latin America. They will have "elaborated" the product for less than ten percent at the secondary level and less than one percent at the higher education levels. There remains only some negative comfort in these statistics: whatever happens in Latin America in 1982 cannot be attributed to the schools, for good or evil.

Time does not permit closer analysis of other specific outcomes of the educational process, but clearly one can conclude that the present enterprise fails monumentally in adequacy and efficiency, at least in regard to literacy. Other observers may wish to guess at the score with regard to arithmetic

skills, vocational, technical, industrial skills, etc.

If one assumes that the initial population, the base population of 1,000, is a random sample of the Latin American countries, then the attrition losses starting with the first year of primary school are inconceivable except as enormous, gross failures of the systems to "elaborate" an acceptable product. From a management point of view there would be few products that would justify a wastage of 99.5 percent; that would be the wastage if the final product were assumed to be ready only after higher education.

Wastage would be 95 percent if the product were marketable only after secondary schooling, and it would be 80 percent if marketability were possible after primary education. I am quite aware that a school-leaver with four years' primary education is not a total loss, but if the system is designed to turn out a product carefully elaborated through three stages, the market need has not been met.

In the case of marketability, however, the general problem may be more important than specific examples. Latin American educational systems are integral; that is, in most countries the usable product comes out only at the top; anything coming out before the university degree is a failure, a cast-off, a reject, an incomplete product. I hasten to add that this phenomenon is to be found throughout the world, but its universality does not mitigate its damage.

In other words, Latin American education does not plan to release acceptable products at different levels. The system is generally geared to turn out university degrees. I am not saying

that the vast majority think they have a realistic chance of "going all the way;" what I am saying is that the system is arranged to put the vast majority on one assembly line.

I do not know of any Latin American system which has a planned two-year elementary school curriculum designed to prepare rural people for better lives, greater agricultural production, better health. The two years' schooling experienced by most rural children in Latin America is the first two years of the full primary school, which is in turn preparation for secondary school, which, in turn, is preparation for the university. The flow chart, therefore, is a flow chart of failure. The 25 percent of the Argentine children who leave after the first year of school are not a very marketable product; neither are the 84 percent of the Brazilians who have less than four years of school experience. Please allow me to add only one peripheral thought—in the form of a question. "What has happened psychologically to the millions of children who are ejected from an alien school production line?"

The question of quality control plagues school systems throughout the world. In the U.S., where great population mobility is widespread, there is a great concern to establish universal norms by grade. Standardized testing, national in scope, is illuminating regional and institutional differences. Latin America, in its own pattern of regionalism, is also establishing some norms, especially at the higher education levels. A university degree is tending to become standardized throughout the hemisphere. The central question in quality control is whether the right variables are being checked. In the edu-

cational enterprise the major variable seems to be "recall." Once again I draw upon U.S. experience. It has been found in U.S. testing that the most reliable predictor of success in universities is success in high school. In other words, each succeeding level of education is a continuation of the same set of variables from the earlier levels. The trick, of course, is to find out if there is any relationship between the qualities of the product "elaborated" and the product required by society.

Any further discussion of quality control in education would have to depend upon some agreement on the definition of the product; having failed to accomplish that earlier, I shall avoid further pointless verbiage. Let me conclude this section by commenting that Aristotle's dictum seems to apply throughout our examination of education: The most practical first consideration is clarification of final goals.

Search for Improved Production

The usual attack on the inadequacy of the Latin American schools is to call for dramatic expansions in the number of children, number of teachers, number of buildings, books—all of which signify dramatic increases in educational investment. From the management point of view one should ask at this point: Why expand an operation that is functioning at one-half of one percent efficiency? Are there any alternate operations which would produce the same results?

Taking the example of literacy as a product, would it be expedient to double the number of pupils entering first grade in order to double the number

coming out of fourth grade? Patently it would be far more reasonable to look to internal modifications before simply expanding present operations. The implications of this line of thinking are nothing less than revolutionary for educators. What we are really saying is that schools as we know them may not be adequate and efficient to produce the desired outcomes for the changing societies of Latin America. If literacy is a desired outcome, then some new, probably strange, more than likely frightening, institutional forms and processes may produce it. If we go beyond literacy and ask questions about outcomes that touch on the values, behavior, orientation, and perspectives of tomorrow's citizens, the prospects are downright eerie.

The Challenge

The questions of marketability and quality control are related. The set of pertinent questions goes like this: What products does the market require? What is the minimum acceptable quality? At what point does increased educational investment fail to produce increased quality?

Perhaps it is wrong for me to pose these questions and then claim that the answers must come only after long, thoughtful, detailed professional examination, experimentation and evaluation. If so, my only defense is that an arbi-

trary answer to these questions is the beginning of an authoritarianism Latin America has so far avoided. I believe Latin America is working its way to its own answers as to the characteristics of its man of tomorrow.

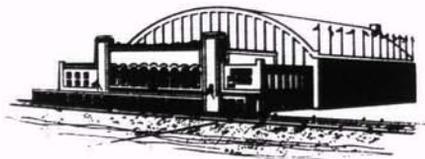
My experience makes me confident that Latin America will not accept a mechanistic technocracy; neither will it surrender to a romantic idealism which never existed (except in books) and which will pale beside the marvels of realism. My guess is that Latin America, more than any other region in the world, will create a future uniquely derived from its rich traditions and creatively expressed in yet undiscovered innovations.

Latin America is beginning to describe its man of tomorrow. His skills, his values, his behavior are the products required in the new marketplace. If the present schools cannot produce for the market, other production lines will have to be invented. If they are not—well, then the dreams will not come true. Today the schools are not producing what the present market requires; given the inertia of the schools themselves, only mammoth and continued pressure from the other social, political, and economic sectors will generate the drastic changes needed. The history of education has told us something about processes of institutional change; hopefully, Latin America may profit from that history! 5

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