

DOING IT WRONG AND DOING IT RIGHT

Education in Latin America and Asia

A decade ago most of Latin America seemed to be recovering from the desperation of the “lost decade” of the 1980s. More than that, many countries seemed to be confronting long-standing developmental challenges in ways that had a chance of breaking them out of their recurrent crises. But “seemed” is the operative word here, for as many countries from Venezuela through Peru to Argentina enter the new millennium it is clear that most of those hopes and many of the expectations were seriously exaggerated if not altogether misplaced. This is a blow not only to the peoples of Latin America but also to those in the United States, for America has a large though largely ignored stake in the prosperity and security of the region. The challenge for Washington now will be to focus U.S. support so as to promote development, not reinforce stagnation.

This analysis grows out of more than forty years of living and traveling in Latin America, China, and Southeast Asia and the similarities and differences observed there over that time.¹ Each visit to Latin America and Asia shows how things *are* changing in some places and how they are *not* changing, or changing very little, in others. Of course broadly based comparisons can be treacherous. Multiple factors are involved, and each region, each country, and indeed even parts of each

country have unique conditions and characteristics, which can change over time. Still, there are enough legitimate similarities and sufficient data to conclude that Latin American leaders should study some aspects of the Asian experience. The primary focus here is on one of the major factors in these changes, namely, the role of high-quality universal basic education as an integral part of the development process.² The Asian countries discussed here are those that have undertaken serious reforms and include in unequal degrees Japan, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.³ To highlight the Latin American situation, I will include a case study of Chile. This country is widely known for having one of Latin America's best education systems as measured in regional surveys and, more than any other Latin American country in recent years, has taken part in important international comparisons of educational systems.

THE WILL TO CHANGE

The title of this essay presupposes certain desirable ends, namely, economic growth that benefits all the people by providing greater economic and political opportunities for all. Latin American leaders often say they favor greater and sustained economic development, substantially reduced poverty, real equality of opportunity across the classes, and the active participation of all their people in the affairs of the nation. In polls and interviews, Latin Americans in general have expressed the same hopes and expectations. But changes in Latin America and Asia today are occurring within the context of cultural traditions and institutional systems that for centuries (in many respects millennia) never considered education important or even desirable for the majority of the people in a country. In the past, countries in both areas were dominated by elites who ruled through authoritarian, collectivist systems that permitted little individual or even group initiative.

In Latin America—my primary focus—the Indian civilizations that preceded the Iberian conquest were hierarchical societies dominated by

a ruling elite. More important for today, the colonial and even independent (the early nineteenth century) periods were the same, for the culture and institutions were based on Roman and civil law, the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Francisco Suárez, Iberian transplants, positivism, corporatism, and other “organic” philosophies.⁴

Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz often tried to get Americans to understand the differences between themselves and Mexicans. Two decades ago he wrote, “To cross the border between [Mexico and the United States] is to change civilizations. Americans are the children of the Reformation, and their origins are those of the modern world; we Mexicans are the children of the Spanish empire, the champion of the Counterreformation, a movement that opposed the new modernity and failed.” The Europeans who settled in the United States mostly fanned out from what was called “New England,” while Mexico, which became the launching place for settlements in Spanish South America, was called “New Spain.”⁵ In another commentary, Paz noted that Latin America’s philosophy and institutions were “built to last, not to change” and that in the long run “became a confine, a prison.” A Peruvian analyst has added that “it is said that Latin America’s misfortune is instability” when in fact it is just the opposite: Latin America has for centuries been marked by excessive stability.⁶

The main method of governance in the colonial period and since has been to pacify would-be “new players” in the society by incorporating them into the accepted orthodoxy and institutions, which until recently significantly reduced the incidence of conflict. The most obvious twentieth-century example is the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which for decades included almost all sectors of society and ruled virtually unchallenged for a major portion of the last century. Although the PRI has now lost its absolute dominance in Mexico, the same type of thinking and institutions still guide PRI “dinosaurs” and many others in Latin America.⁷

These traditional cultures and institutions are not easily changed. Nobel economist Douglass North has written on the challenges en-

countered when trying to reform traditional societies, with particular reference to those in Latin America with their Iberian colonial heritage: “The persistence of the institutional pattern that had been imposed by Spain and Portugal continued to play a fundamental role in the evolution of Latin American policies and perceptions and to distinguish that continent’s history. . . . Although formal rules may be changed overnight as a result of political or judicial decisions, informal constraints embodied in customs, traditions, and codes of conduct are much more impervious to deliberate policies.”⁸

In an invaluable new study, Howard Wiarda emphasizes that Latin America is not a “retarded” version of the United States, as many Americans seem to think, but a separate branch of European civilization that is not necessarily “fated” to become like us.⁹ Increasingly today in Latin America, leaders are realizing that if they provide universal high-quality basic education that prepares people to take charge of their lives and contribute creatively to the nation, they are launching a revolution. Indeed, such a change is far more revolutionary than anything Fidel Castro or Mao Zedong ever contemplated. This type of revolutionary process begins with a universal basic education that is increasingly common in Asia and far better in Cuba than in other Latin American countries. But it continues with universal access to knowledge and the freedom to use that knowledge creatively, both of which are denied in Castro’s Cuba and China, particularly under Mao but in some ways even today.¹⁰

Latin American leaders and the Latin American people, to the degree that the latter have a voice in determining their own fates, must first decide whether they really *want* to launch this revolution. If they do, they must figure out how, and how far, they want to go. These questions are not as simple as they may seem because of the aforementioned cultural and institutional differences. Some leaders clearly aspire to this revolution, while others may say they want it but in fact fear that such changes would disrupt essential aspects of their culture and tradition and, not incidentally, threaten their personal vested interests.¹¹

Many Latin Americans are concerned about the possibility of sacrificing critical aspects of Hispanic civilization to gain the efficiency and materialism that many consider the core of U.S. culture. Leaders who are disinclined to take chances, or have substantial vested interests, whether cultural or personal, to defend, are likely to adapt as little as possible when confronting the “modern” world. Indeed, people who were brought up in traditional ways often want the benefits of reforms but find it difficult or impossible to make the necessary substantive educational and cultural changes to bring them about.¹² Thus, in the end, many of the most serious problems facing education reformers in Latin America as well as Asia are not educational problems at all but rather the traditional cultural, social, and institutional obstacles to developing “human capital” by giving individuals the competence and opportunities to take control of their lives and the nation.¹³

GENERAL REFORM: ASIA AND LATIN AMERICA

Forty years ago Asia and Latin America were at about the same levels of economic and educational development. Indeed, in some cases at that time Latin America was ahead of Asia and in some respects still is.¹⁴ Since then, however, Latin America and reforming Asia have followed very different educational paths that were chosen by national leaders either out of conviction or expediency. The consequences have been very different.

Most analyses of the Asian “tigers” or “dragons” point to the critical role played in their reforms by macroeconomic strategies, which were the result of serious thought about economic development. Despite temporary setbacks, growth rates in reforming Asian countries have been high and sustained over several decades and their foundations are far better than those in Latin America. Levels of poverty, inequality, and birthrates have been reduced, and health care has greatly improved. The workforce is generally literate, disciplined, and flexible. Reformed Asians are well above world averages in life expectancy, per capita gross

domestic product, and literacy. Most have increased personal and professional opportunities.¹⁵ But none of these changes happened by accident or coincidence. They are the result of deliberate political and economic decisions by political leaders and their advisers.¹⁶

By contrast, most Latin American countries alternate periods of economic growth and political stability with periods of economic crisis and surface-level political instability. Support for substantive reforms waxes and wanes as politically competent and incompetent, decisive and indecisive, leaders enter and leave office. Unfortunately, Latin America has had a high percentage of incompetent leaders. The hopes that were raised during the 1990s under Carlos Menem in Argentina, under Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and in several other countries have been dashed in recent years. The levels of inequality in Latin America are the highest in the world and rising, and most people in the region have limited opportunities to significantly improve their situations. With the exception of Chile and in some respects Mexico, no Latin American country has been nearly as successful in developing a stable and productive economic system, and in expanding *some* civic options, as Asia's reformers.¹⁷

EDUCATION IN ASIA

One clear indication that a developing country is serious about becoming modern is its education system. Whereas a major part of reforming Asia's success in joining the modern world has been its education system, a major impediment to Latin America's doing nearly as well has been *its* form of education. A successful system in the long term must be universal and effectively instill the knowledge and skills people need to increase their opportunities and productivity. This is a critical factor in developing national economies, improving income distribution, reducing poverty, and promoting popular participation in society. The record, which I will cite later, speaks for itself.

I do not want to idealize the Asian accomplishment. First, nonre-

forming Asian countries, mainly in South Asia, are like African countries and behind much of Latin America in almost every way.¹⁸ Even the countries in Asia that are successfully reforming have serious problems in the education field. These are often similar to problems faced in Latin America, though they are worse in Latin America because Asian countries have adopted more successful strategies to overcome them.

These problems include the lack of training and standards for teachers and administrators, poor monitoring of teaching and programs, inadequate statistics, the lack of incentives and “distance learning” (mainly via the Internet), and practices that downplay or don’t grasp cost-effectiveness. These problems are often exacerbated by specific earlier governments, notably Mao’s in China.¹⁹ There is too little attention to the poor, women, and minorities and to the differences in quality between public and private schools. Other challenges include decentralization, a lack of funding (whether public, private, or a combination of the two), an overemphasis on memorization rather than critical thinking, and denial of access to what leaders consider politically offensive knowledge. Asian schools tend to place a far greater emphasis on hard work and extended periods of time studying, in class and at home, than do Latin Americans or the vast majority of North Americans. Indeed, the strong pressures on students in Asia to excel have drawn criticism from students and adults alike, in those countries and abroad. This aspect of Asian education is foreign to Latin Americans and most Americans alike. It is undeniable, however, that the Asian system produces a more literate and productive, if not always more creative, population.²⁰

EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Most Latin American constitutions promise education for all the people. But an Inter-American Development Bank study in 1998 observed that “guarantees of universal primary education in Latin America have be-

come false entitlements for the poor: the education available to them has been of such poor quality as to be of little real benefit.” The study continued that “low and unequal accumulation of human capital can be stated more simply: public education has not reached the poor in Latin America. A major culprit in this failure is a model of social service delivery that has reflected and reinforced social, economic and political inequities.” That delivery system includes state-run education monopolies and unions that often seem to have limited interest in the education of students. The 1998 study concluded that, “despite adequate public spending, accumulation of human capital in Latin America has been low and inequitable . . . the distribution of education has hardly improved over time.”²¹

A 2001 study sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment and Inter-American Dialogue was less negative. It concluded that distribution of education has improved somewhat in Latin America since the 1960s but that progress there has been “much slower than in East Asia.” For example, according to that report, the average Latin American adult in 1970 had under four years education, whereas the average Asian had a little more than four years. Today the average Latin American adult has just over five years, whereas the average Asian has almost ten. According to two IDB analysts, Latin America’s average school levels are two years below what they should be for the region’s per capita incomes. Indeed, they are almost the same as those in sub-Saharan Africa, a sobering datum for Latin American leaders and people to ponder. What is more, “low and unequal accumulation of human capital in Latin America has slowed aggregate economic growth and has inhibited poverty reduction.”²² (The adult figure may rise slightly in the years ahead because, according to some reports, two-thirds of Latin American children today get at least some secondary education. Even if this is true, the quality still is usually very low.)²³

In 2001 the Corporation for Development Research in Santiago, Chile, and the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington released their second study in three years on education in Latin America. It began by

noting that in 1998 they had concluded that “Latin America’s schools were holding back the region and its people by reinforcing poverty, inequality, and poor economic performance.” The roots of the problem then were “(1) a failure to set standards for student learning and to evaluate performance; (2) the absence of authority and accountability at the school level; (3) poor teaching; and (4) insufficient investment in primary and secondary education.” The 2001 report then concluded that “only limited progress” had been made over the intervening years. “The average schooling of the workforce rose by less than 1% annually during the 1990s,” the 2001 report said, “compared with sustained annual rates of some 3% over three decades for the four Asian Tigers” (Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong). It concluded that “scores on national and international exams are alarmingly low . . . quality education seldom reaches poor, rural, or indigenous children . . . comprehensive national standards have not been established and implemented, teachers are poorly trained, poorly managed and poorly paid. Superior teaching is seldom recognized, supported or rewarded.” Finally, the report warned that Latin America “is fast falling behind its competitors. This trend will not change unless governments are able to muster the political will and public support for more extensive and sustained reforms.”²⁴

Looking at Latin America’s largest country, Brazil, the 1988 constitution mandates substantial expenditures on education at the state and municipal levels. But the system is encumbered by huge bureaucracies, a serious lack of even marginally trained teachers, little attention to priorities and accounting, extensive corruption, and political manipulation of the system. A legacy of the country’s directed development history three decades ago, which emphasized funding university education because it would contribute more quickly to development, is that higher education today gets some 60 percent of federal education monies. This has resulted in “a stunted primary and secondary school system.”²⁵ During the 1990s in Brazil, however, in the state of Minas Gerais, there were experiments with (1) school autonomy with community

involvement, (2) allocation of funds to principals on the basis of performance, (3) teacher training programs, and (4) development of a system of standardized assessment of students.²⁶ In Argentina, economist Ricardo López Murphy conducted a presidential campaign during late 2002 stressing the need for strong preschool programs, weighting school support toward the poor, and giving parents a greater say in where they send their children to school.²⁷

Most of the international comparisons below involve few Latin American countries, with the important exception of a 1998 UNESCO survey that tested fourth-grade students from thirteen Latin American countries, including Cuba. That survey found that Cuban children were far better educated than children from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, the region's next-best performers. The UNESCO testers were so struck by the Cuban scores that they retested on the island to be sure and got the same results.²⁸ Among the reasons for Cuba's success are the country's higher number of good teachers. Also Cuban teachers are often evaluated, and those who fall behind are sent back for refresher courses.²⁹ At the same time, Cuba's stagnant economy is proof that high-quality universal education alone is not enough to assure significant economic development. When people are denied access to much of the knowledge of humankind, and the freedom to creatively earn a living income, even good teachers are driven out of the profession. What is more, government salaries are so low in a stagnant economy that some teachers (as well as doctors, lawyers, and others) opt to support themselves and families by earning U.S. dollars in the tourist industry as guides, taxi drivers, or prostitutes. Ironically, Cuba's education system is preparing Cuba's children to be successful but only after Fidel Castro is gone.

Case Study: Education in Chile

The focus here is on educational performance in Chile, though the critiques apply, with equal or greater vigor, to the systems of other countries.

In most respects, Chilean economic reforms launched by the government of Augusto Pinochet, and only marginally modified by Christian Democratic and Socialist leaders since March 1990, have been the most substantive and successful in all of Latin America. As in Asia, economic growth created a demand for better-educated workers.³⁰ Education reforms under Pinochet sought to expand and raise the quality and quantity of education by improving teaching, enforcing standards, reducing bureaucracy, and decentralizing administrative control. These and other objectives were to be met in part by greatly expanding private education that, while deliberately competing with public schools, nonetheless received per-student subsidies from the government equal to those of state schools.³¹ More recent reforms have sought to consolidate public and private spending on education and further expand coverage, while taking a great leap backward, according to many critics, by re-unionizing all teachers.³²

Former education minister Sergio Molina wrote at the beginning of the new millennium that although “elementary and secondary school coverage is satisfactory in Chile . . . there is widespread consensus that quality is inadequate and distribution unequal.”³³ A November 2000 survey, however, found that 38 percent of teachers considered the education system good to very good, 48 percent considered it OK, and only 13 percent rated it bad or very bad. The authors concluded that, “in Chile, we are still not convinced that we should aspire to quality education.” Another Chilean analyst states that “Chilean society is marked by profound inequalities in earnings that are directly related to educational inequalities.” Yet another writes that “we have an educational system that wastes the intellectual capacity of our students.”³⁴

If Chile is doing so well in Latin America, though not up to Cuba in basic instruction, analysts are critical because Chile’s education system is not adequately serving the needs of the country’s people, whatever more than 85 percent of its teachers may think. Chile’s lack of success is evidenced by what children do not know and how badly Chile does in international surveys. In a recent study of twenty countries by the

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada, more than 80 percent of Chileans between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five were reading below the minimum level needed to function in the information age. Three categories of reading were measured in twenty countries, most in the developed world: *prose* (understand poems, editorials, news), *documents* (maps, transportation schedules, etc), and *quantitative* (applying arithmetic in checkbooks, etc). Sweden was first in every category and Chile last.³⁵ In 1965 almost 85 percent of Chileans over age fifteen had been to school; in Malaysia the number was about 59 percent. In 1999 international tests on science and mathematics, discussed below, Malaysians left Chileans in the dust. Although most tests show that students from high-income families tend to be better educated than children from low-income families, high-income Chileans couldn't keep up with low-income Malaysians.³⁶

Other comparisons help demonstrate the low standing of Latin America's educational systems, especially when compared to countries that were their equals only four decades ago. Consider the fields of science and mathematics, which have been found to have an important positive impact on growth.³⁷ The most extensive testing has been done by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Forty-one countries participated in the 1996 test, including two from Latin America: Colombia, which ranked 40 out of 41, and Mexico, which refused to make its scores public. The latest TIMSS study was in 1999 and the next will be in 2003. Thirty-eight countries participated in the 1999 tests focusing on the eighth grade, including only one country from Latin America: Chile.³⁸

In mathematics, the top five countries were all Asian: Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. Chile ranked 35 out of 38. More than half of Chile's eighth-grade students were below the fourth-grade level in math. In all, ten Asian countries ranked above Chile (the United States was nineteenth). In science, four of the top five were Asian: Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. Chile was again thirty-fifth. Again ten Asian countries were ahead of Chile. As

in the mathematics test, the only Asian country to rank below Chile was the Philippines, the only Asian country with a strong Spanish cultural component. The United States jumped from nineteenth in math to eighteenth in science. Testing of this sort, however carefully planned and well-intended, does not measure everything in the education world, but it suggests how much more is being accomplished in many Asian and European countries than in Latin America or the United States, for that matter.

FUNDING BASIC EDUCATION

The greater success in Asia's reforming countries is not because Asians spend a lot more money on education. On average Latin American countries spend about the same amount as other developing countries. The question is *how* the money is spent and *who* benefits. Decades of experience indicate that reforming Asians invest in their people more wisely than Latin Americans, in large part through support of early and universal basic education.³⁹ Nobel laureate Douglass North notes the inclination of Latin American and some other systems to "overwhelmingly promote redistributive rather than productive activity," with the redistribution usually to the benefit of the elites.⁴⁰

The first universities in the Western Hemisphere were in Latin America. In the predominantly Spanish America, universities and lower-level schools were run by the interdependent Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish crown, with independent states replacing the colonial government in the early nineteenth century. These scholastic institutions largely served the crown, church, and elites. Today the ongoing generous public funding of universities means the elites continue to benefit inordinately in that they are the ones who predominantly attend. Once Latin American interest in rapid national economic growth became a goal, state support for higher education has been seen as the most efficient way to achieve that objective. To some

degree, the logic of globalization, and the higher incomes that come with higher education, promotes support for universities.

At the same time, national prosperity and participation in the global system signal the advantage of education for the purpose of creating a broader market with more flexible workers, as the Asians have demonstrated.⁴¹ Almost a decade ago, at a conference highlighting Asian lessons for Latin America, Argentine Ricardo López Murphy noted that one of the main characteristics of the Latin American experience has been to “subsidize the most privileged in society.” In Latin American countries generally the universities receive heavy subsidies while in Asia, López Murphy noted with approval, “the emphasis has been on primary and secondary education.”⁴² Douglass North and Nancy Birdsall (the IDB analyst who has worked most on this subject) emphasize this same point; former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castañeda has urged Latin American governments “to allocate what little money there is to elementary schooling.”⁴³

Why does this matter today? Because in practice public funding of higher education means that a high percentage of students who benefit are from the middle and upper classes, many of whom could afford to pay for private university study. The cost of providing a single student a free education in a university is estimated at about fifty times higher than supporting a student in primary school. This means that for every upper-class (or, for that matter, lower-income) student in most Latin American universities, fifty poorer students either will not go to primary school at all or will attend one of inferior quality.⁴⁴ Some progress is being made in several countries, as when Mexico began charging modest fees at the National Autonomous University.⁴⁵ This support for university education does not promote basic education or develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and productivity of the poor, and thus does not make it easier for the poor to improve their lives, contribute to national economic development, and participate constructively in society at all levels. In contrast, East Asians have effectively educated more of the poor, leaving higher education mainly in the private sector.⁴⁶

WHAT MORE CAN LATIN AMERICA LEARN FROM ASIA?

Granting Asia's remaining challenges in broad economic as well as educational matters, the region's successes are obvious. Analysts at the IDB point to three major reasons for East Asia's superior educational performance: first, the positive impact of rapid economic growth resulting from constructive development programs generally, including investment in education; second, the investment of most education support in basic education for all social levels; and, third, the slower growth rates of the school-age population.⁴⁷

Leaders in Latin America and other "developing" countries can learn many other lessons from the Asian experience if they want to create a modern state with the active participation of all their citizens. The following are just a few. First, there must be an honest, strong, and sustained will to reform education and beyond. There must be a strong and sustained conviction that good education is not only important but critical for increasing numbers of people in the modern world and that it is worth working hard to accomplish. Indeed, leaders and populations must understand that, even if many people in developing countries do not seem to have immediate use for a good education, it will help them now and their children and the nation in the future.⁴⁸ Some recent statements on education are suggestive of an intention to reform. For example, in 1998 the *Declaration of Santiago* at the end of the Second Summit of the Americas focused on the idea that "education is the determining factor for the political, social, cultural, and economic development of our peoples." (Four years later, however, the *Declaration of Quebec*, released after the Third Summit of the Americas, mentioned education only briefly toward the end of the document.)⁴⁹ And education has hardly improved in the hemisphere.

Second, serious reform requires high-quality leadership. The essential dynamism and informed commitment cannot be in the president alone. It must extend down through government ministers and society. Indeed, if the minister in charge of education is not as good as the

president, then the president himself is not as good as he should be. If the public does not expect and demand the best, it almost certainly will not get it. Delivering on the commitment to provide good basic education takes broad and long-term commitment to such essentials as the training of teachers and administrators who are able and committed to educating students. Third, quality education will depend on carefully setting standards for curriculum and then enforcing them, as Harald Beyer, Nancy Birdsall, and other analysts quoted above have pointed out. Fourth, education must be decentralized, making it more relevant to communities and getting it out of the clutches of national unions and ministries that seem more interested in perpetuating themselves than teaching children. Decentralization does not automatically mean public funding should be ended altogether, however, if greater equity is a goal.⁵⁰ In the end, substantive and successful reforms in Latin America are in their infancy.⁵¹

Peruvian Hernando de Soto has written that the people of Latin America are not the region's problem, as many leaders seem to think (though the population is still growing too rapidly), but an important part of the *answer* to recurrent economic and political crises if they are prepared through education and given the opportunity to play an active and constructive role. The old style of co-opting everyone into a broad front and dissipating their demands will no longer work. Again, the Latin American people and their leaders are back to the question posed at the beginning: Do they want real reform and its benefits badly enough to accept responsibility for what has failed in the past and be willing to substantially change some traditional ways of doing things?⁵²

CONCLUSIONS AND U.S. POLICY

The message of the Asian experience is clear: Good universal basic education makes most people more productive in and satisfied with their own lives, more adaptable to changing circumstances, and better qualified to contribute to their own and national development. Recognizing

that the development of human capital is a long-term task,⁵³ reforming Asian countries started decades ago, weaving education into a broader program of systematic reform, and have long since been reaping the benefits. The remarkable Asian growth during the last half century occurred because Asian leaders realized they had to implement major reforms, among the most important being education reforms, to grow or even survive in the modern world.⁵⁴ And they did it.

Thus reforming Asian countries have already taken long strides toward participating effectively in the modern world, whereas most Latin American countries are hopping in that direction when they are not stumbling and falling back. Latin America's growth has been intermittent at best, in large part because most of that region's leaders have *not* promoted serious and systematic reforms that would allow the people to break out of the prison of traditional ways.⁵⁵ Many Latin American leaders have moved slowly or not at all on these reforms because they fear restructuring will shift the culture's center of gravity away from the civilization they consider traditional and best. They look with disdain at the impersonal and materialistic lifestyles they perceive in the United States and increasingly in Asia as well.⁵⁶ On the one hand, this concern is simply chauvinistic, for being more prosperous does not necessarily mean having a lower cultural level. Yet, on the other hand, there is reason for their apprehension, for the educational changes proposed here will only succeed in bringing major economic improvements and stability if there *are* some cultural changes.⁵⁷ Others who want the change calculate that it can be done without sacrificing civilization in the process. Reflecting on conditions in late 2002, Argentine Enrique Pinti said that his country today lives in total darkness but, to an audience roaring its approval, that he looked to a future green and alive, unlike the present. In that world, even poor children would be able to go to a school that would give them at least a *hope* for the future.⁵⁸

Latin America's implementation of substantive reforms, or failure to do so, is of direct interest to the United States. The failure of these countries to provide universal basic education will make it difficult for

them to develop stable and productive economies. Without strong internal markets and economies, the countries themselves will not prosper and the already enormous and potentially greater U.S. trade and investment in the hemisphere will be threatened. Also, the failure to develop substantially will mean a continuation of the cycles of frustration among Latin Americans and make inevitable excessive migration to the United States.⁵⁹ What is more, failing economies promote Latin Americans, from peasants to businesspeople to politicians, to become involved in the production and peddling of narcotics and the violence that follows. Even the more broadly based domestic violence that was so common in the 1960s and 1970s could begin again. Finally, Americans wish to see their southern neighbors able to participate actively in the unfolding of their own futures, in large part through higher standards of health and education.

Thus the United States should promote education reform among Latin Americans, bilaterally and multilaterally, and support serious efforts when they are made. Americans must be careful, however, in selecting models and providing aid. First, it will not serve anyone's interests for us to hold ourselves up as the only or even primary model for Latin American education reform. To be sure, in some respects the United States and Europe can conscientiously and constructively encourage Latin American schools to be more like ours. For example, Latin Americans will gain by learning more English, as the essential international language, by cultivating critical thinking and inductive in addition to deductive reasoning, and by instilling values that promote more stable and productive political and economic systems.

At the same time, the American system is not a fruitful model in other respects. For example, many parts of the United States have to cope with challenges that are seldom found in Latin America or most parts of Asia, not least the incredible ethnic, linguistic, and other diversities of the population. But also, how could the United States be a model when it so consistently places at just average or a little above average in international testing? Thus the United States should en-

courage Latin Americans to study the experiences of other nations and cultures, particularly those that have had similar challenges in recent decades. This is where the reforming Asian countries have shown how underdeveloped nations can make things happen. To be sure, in some degree the Asian successes flow from cultural characteristics that are not shared by most Latin Americans, including respect for education and often relentless individual and family motivation to achieve high goals. Although Latin Americans may pick up some of that ambition and drive, other Asian lessons are more easily transferred, namely, the ones discussed in this essay.

But the United States should also be careful when and how it assists Latin Americans. Under most circumstances, it is not in our interest to support the elitist aspects of Latin American culture against those that would promote broader democratic participation.⁶⁰ When the will to reform is present, and successful steps are taken to advance serious long-term programs, then aid should be provided in various forms, from expertise to dollars, to either groups or governments. When governments, by their actions, signal that they do not intend to adapt or reform some traditional practices, thus denying their people and nations the education needed to participate in the modern globally integrated world, we should admonish them and decline to underwrite their endeavors. Just as they have the sovereign right to do nothing or implement half-measures (thus benefiting mainly the elites), we have the sovereign right to let them pay the consequences. If in fact many Latin America countries are wading again into the Slough of Despond, which will mean the United States will support fewer governments than in the 1990s and more reform-oriented groups. In the end, we cannot help those countries if they do not understand how to, or will not, help themselves.