CHAPTER FOUR

THE ADVANCE OF MASS EDUCATION:
QUANTITY OR QUALITY?

4.1 Introduction

Where the distribution of land had largely determined the opportunities of social mobility in the pre-modern settler colonies, schooling became the prime determinant of social mobility in the 20th century. With modern economic development the share of land based income in Latin American GDP decreased. Consequently, the role of land inequality as a direct source of income inequality diminished over time. In the meantime, the demand for human capital by technology and skill-intensive urban industries increased and the distribution of education became of paramount importance for the distribution of income.

The indirect effects of land inequality on income inequality may have persisted much longer than its direct effects. Theoretical and empirical studies have shown that there is a negative relationship between land inequality and educational investment. One of the main reasons is that land based elites have little incentives to pay taxes for schooling the lower income classes (Mariscal and Sokoloff 2000, Gregorio and Lee 2000, Galor et al. 2003, Lindert 2004, Wegenast 2008). But apart from economic motives, aristocratic values and ideologies do not perceive mass schooling as beneficial for society as a whole (Bakewell 2004: pp. 454–6). As long as aristocratic ideologies are corroborated by a relatively static social and economic structure, the poor masses have little incentives to send their children to school either: why would subsistence farmers, péones, serfs and slaves invest in education without a clear perspective of intergenerational social mobility? The forces of economic modernisation gradually reduced the all embracing power of the landed elites in Latin America however. The increasing demand of an urban industrial entrepreneurial class for an educated workforce came along with alternative views of civil emancipation. Especially among the urban working classes the awareness grew that education offered the ultimate path out of poverty (Reimers 2006).
The present chapter analyses the spread of mass education in Latin America from 1870 onwards, adopting a global comparative perspective. It pays specific attention to the timing and pace of primary school enrolment expansion. The central question is to which extent the initial conditions of inequality have affected the advance of mass education in the 20th century. Did the spread of mass education come along with improvements in the quality of the educational system or did it go at its expense? Can we identify break points in the pace of educational expansion? How slow or fast was the spread of mass education in comparison to other countries? How long did it take before the diffusion of mass education led to a more egalitarian distribution of schooling years attained? Assessing such comprehensive questions inevitably invokes a certain degree of generalisation, but a global comparative perspective helps to assess some contested ‘stylized facts’ of Latin American educational development. Most scholars would argue that the unequal distribution of education has constrained Latin American economic growth and, more generally, can be seen as a crucial determinant of high income inequality. Some recent studies do not find evidence for such a relationship however. These diverging views on the role of education will receive specific attention as well.

This chapter argues, among other things, that LACs were collectively lagging behind in terms of the spread of mass education in the late 19th century, but that the increase in primary school enrolment rates during the 20th century was, in fact, not slower, nor faster, than could be expected on the basis of the patterns observed in the rest of the world. It has been faster than in the most advanced industrial countries and it was notably slower than in the poorest developing countries in Sub Saharan Africa. Moreover, the expansion of school enrolment came along with a comparatively egalitarian gender distribution from the late 19th century onwards. Yet, more than in any other region of the world, the expansion of primary education took place at the expense of the quality of education. A comparative analysis of grade enrolment distribution ratio’s reveals that it took even the most advanced LACs such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay at least four decades to achieve acceptable levels of grade promotion and school completion after having achieved full primary school enrolment rates. Only since the 1980’s grade repetition and pre-completion drop out rates were reduced faster than in most other developing countries.

Section 4.2 briefly discusses the relationship between land inequality and investment in public education and reviews the extent of educational