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## ASSESSING THE GLOBALIZATION–DECENTRALIZATION NEXUS

*Patterns of Education and Reform in Mexico, Chile, Argentina  
and Nicaragua*

### 1. INTRODUCTION: A ROADMAP

At first glance, a chapter dealing with educational policy may seem out-of-place in a series devoted to the study of global governance and converging markets. While the literature on this subject often gives extensive treatment to the demands and pressures placed upon national economies, the demands being made upon national social sectors have received fewer considerations. Where the literature does attend to this matter, it often assumes, rather than demonstrates that social policy is governed by global processes and economic patterns. In educational policy, for example, the vast number of countries to have enacted large-scale, decentralization is often taken as evidence for globalization's effect on educational policy (Folwer, 1995; McGinn, 1997; Scribener and Layton 1995; Schugurensky, 1999). Here, converging trends in educational decentralization and economic restructuring appear as 'twinning outcomes of the new globalization' (Carnoy, 2002: xvi), policies which are seen as 'increasingly governed by similar [external] pressures, procedures and organizational patterns' (Schugurensky, 1999: 288). Viewed from this perspective, educational decentralization appears as a significant neo-liberal reform, an evaluation that appears quite problematic in light of new evidence.

Attending to national difference in social policy is, at the very least, as important as attending to the issue of global policy convergence. Although often overlooked in studies of global convergence, understanding why the educational institutions of some countries are more responsive than others in the face of common pressures to converge is crucial for understanding the true influence of global markets on national educational institutions (Carnoy, 2002). This study seeks to shed some insight into this question by examining why educational decentralization is more advanced in some Latin American countries than others. However, this task is made more complex by the diverse and often inadequate

explorations of the linkage between education decentralization and 'neo-liberalism', a confusion that must be addressed.

The tasks of this chapter are twofold. First, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational decentralization, and its linkages, to broader processes of neo-liberalism. As this analysis demonstrates, decentralization, being the transfer of decision-making authority and policy responsibilities from central to lower administrative tiers, does not always coincide with neo-liberal preferences. Second, to identify the factors that have, in large part, determined why some countries are more responsive to these external demands. Here, several hypotheses are tested in order to isolate the factors that may have a patterning influence on a country's responsiveness to global policy preferences. While this analysis deals with educational decentralization as a general feature of global policy convergence, the specific points are illustrated by reference to Latin America's experience with educational reform.

The findings of this study present a challenge to the much lobbied critique of globalization, which pictures educational decentralization as externally imposed upon Latin America through the coercive power of international financial institutions and global markets (Schugurensky, 1999: 289). Instead, the conclusion drawn is that inherently structural views of educational decentralization miss the true scenario of educational decentralization in Latin America. This is because they fail to consider, for example, that education in Latin America is highly political; often involves intense political bargaining between national interests; and has historically served an important ideological function. These factors are shown in our analysis to have a critical, patterning influence on a country's responsiveness to global preferences. Instead, it is suggested that there is explanatory merit in variables informed by the theories of political economy and political bargaining. Specifically, the relative bargaining power of key actors at the national level is found to have an important patterning influence on the advancement of educational decentralization in Latin America.

This chapter is comprised of five sections. The first provides a roadmap for the study. The second provides a working definition of educational decentralization as a neo-liberal reform. The third examines the limitations of structural perspectives that attribute the global pressures as the primary cause of educational decentralization in Latin America. The fourth seeks to provide a better account of national difference in educational policy by evaluating several, key variables informed by both political economy. In the final section, we draw on these insights to offer some conclusions.

## 2. DECENTRALIZATION AS NEO-LIBERALISM: A WORKING DEFINITION

Despite the popularity of decentralization in education, its effects do not often filter down to the classroom (World Bank, 1999). This failure may have more to do with the conceptual confusion surrounding the term, rather than with a flaw