TO VOCATIONALIZE OR NOT TO VOCATIONALIZE?
THAT IS THE CURRICULUM QUESTION

GEORGE PSACHAROPOULOS*

Abstract — The paper presents a framework within which curriculum options can be analyzed, with emphasis on the economics of choosing the vocational intensity of instruction. Empirical evidence is reviewed at the primary, secondary and university levels regarding the costs and benefits of alternative programmes. Such evidence indicates that the costs of vocational programmes are considerably higher than those of general education, while their benefits are comparable. The paper questions the validity of providing more efficient alternatives like purely vocational institutions or employment-based training.


Résumé — L'article présente un cadre à l'intérieur duquel les choix de programmes peuvent être opérés en insistant sur les aspects économiques liés à la préférence pour l'intensité professionnelle de l'instruction. On y analyse des évidences empiriques recueillies aux niveaux primaire, secondaire et universitaire concernant les coûts et les bénéfices des programmes alternatifs. Ces données indiquent que les coûts de l'enseignement professionnel sont considérablement plus élevés que ceux de l'enseignement général, alors que leurs bénéfices sont comparables. L'article met en cause le bien-fondé de l'introduction d'un enseignement professionnel dans le courant principal de l'éducation et considère plus efficace d'avoir recours à d'autres alternatives comme les institutions pures de formation professionnelle ou celles de formation basée sur l'emploi.

What is taught in school — the curriculum — is the result of a complex process involving a variety of factors. At the compulsory schooling level, it mostly reflects a social (paternalistic and national) consensus on the subject

matter every child should master. At the post-compulsory levels, such consensus is diluted by what students and their families want to be taught, and the nature of skills in demand by the employers. The private choice element as a determinant of the curriculum becomes stronger in post-compulsory education and in non-state supported institutions, such as proprietary schools.

Traditionally, the subject matter has been determined by educators who, taking social or private values into account, lay out the syllabi and number of periods each subject should be taught. Economic considerations are rarely mentioned in the curriculum literature. Once politicians and educators are persuaded that a given curriculum option should be taught in school, curriculum reform is mandated. However, whether the reform is implemented or not, or whether it eventually has its intended effect, is also a function of elementary economics.

The purpose of this paper is, first, to provide an analytical framework within which curriculum issues can be analyzed, and second, to present a review of empirical findings touching upon the economics of the curriculum, especially in developing countries. It is concluded that, by necessity, economic considerations will be increasingly incorporated into policy decisions on the curriculum content.

I. Analytical Framework

One major dimension of the curriculum is the degree of its vocalization. At the primary level, the question is usually cast in terms of ‘ruralizing the curriculum’ or ‘combining education with production’. At the secondary level, the policy issue is whether to ‘diversify’ the curriculum or to include ‘pre-vocational’, ‘enrichment’ or ‘practical’ subjects. At the post-secondary level, the issue is cast in terms of ‘fields of study’, i.e. whether the university faculty mix should be biased towards clearly vocational subjects (like agronomy), or the liberal arts.

In all cases, curriculum choice is a matter of degree rather than being black or white. Figure 1 gives an example of the degree of vocalization that can be provided at the secondary-school level. At the extreme left are the traditional academic secondary schools emphasizing language, mathematics, history, geography and science. Next are the comprehensive or diversified schools which, beyond academic subjects, offer pre-vocational courses, e.g. in industrial arts, agriculture or commerce. Further to the right lie secondary-level pure vocational schools dedicated to a particular profession, e.g. car mechanics. At the extreme right is another choice, never considered in curriculum discussions, that the vocational skills can be imparted by on-the-job training outside the school system.