It is usually agreed that enjoying the benefits of technical progress, avoiding its paradoxes and strengthening and modernizing ethics and politics in the context of globalization require skills such as learning how to learn, to be, to do and to live together (Delors et al., 1996). It is also commonly recognized that those who do not possess these skills will be doomed to lead a life of extreme poverty (Reich, 1991; Rifkin, 1996; Gorz, 1998).

Imparting these skills, however, requires more years and a higher standard of basic education than in the past.

Conceptually speaking, basic education is not in fact the same as primary education. It refers to the type of education needed for a better quality of life and for lifelong learning in an increasingly complex and challenging world. Basic education conveys the notion of a ‘base’, a ‘foundation’, a ‘construction and take-off platform’.

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If so, the number of years available in old-fashioned primary schooling is not sufficient to build this base.

On the other hand, improving the quality of basic education in this century implies aiming for a new type of education altogether, rather than an improved version of the education provided in former centuries. The theory that the extra time needed for basic education may be gained just by expanding the secondary education inherited in the twenty-first century is debatable.

Schools with rigid timetables, overloaded curricula with thirteen or fourteen subjects a year centred on information that students have to learn by rote, forty-minute lessons and uniform content for many different personalities do not offer suitable conditions, for instance, for learning to learn. If, in addition, the physical and didactic infrastructure of the education system is inadequate or poor, the situation will be even worse.

Families and the young people themselves are aware of both aspects. In order to obtain more time for basic training, they tend to opt to stay on in the education system, making a great effort in many parts of the world, with considerable success, to take advantage of the type of education that is on offer nowadays, namely secondary education. This effort is unsuccessful only in places where the process of deinstitutionalization (Castells, 1997) is extremely serious and affects the education system as well. In those situations, the youngsters tend to go for education provided by families or by parallel community networks of public and private schools.

However, the same families and youngsters, who are aware that a different type of education is needed—not the same as before or a 'warmed up' version—and who participate in secondary education where it is most developed, are showing growing dissatisfaction, which expresses itself in different ways. One of these is the violence of young people among themselves or directed against the principals and teaching staff of secondary schools. This violence is often met with increased supervision and even armed control.

A look back at the origins and main milestones in the expansion of secondary education may help us to understand this apparent paradox: access to secondary education is sought where it is not certain to be available and it is criticized everywhere, but more so where it is already well established.

The secondary education that has been passed down to the twenty-first century appeared in Europe after a long process that started in the twelfth century. Its great expansion, which began in Europe and continued in the United States and in the progressive countries of Latin America and Asia after the Second World War, has now spread to the whole world.

Seeking access to secondary education is a way of trying to obtain more years of basic education and to become part of the virtuous circle of social and economic development. It is a response to the perception of a world developing at two speeds and to the risk that those who fail to obtain more and better education will fall by the wayside.

The expansion of secondary education is, in turn, a response to this search for access and belonging, and very often—although not always—it amounts to a reflex response or the outcome of unsatisfactory bargaining with acquired rights.