Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform[1] - Summary

Professor Merilee Grindle[2] of Harvard University Explains
the Success of Reform Initiatives in Latin America in the 1990s

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[1] *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform* is available for purchase at www.amazon.com.

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Throughout Latin America, the 1990s witnessed a wave of educational reforms intended to improve the quality of instruction provided to children in the region. Countries adopted different measures, and the extent of the changes varied considerably from one nation to another, but in general terms, there was a significant shift towards the decentralization of Latin American educational systems, and towards emphasis on administrative efficiency, more effective pedagogy, and greater accountability of teachers, students, and schools. In Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Argentina, and in other countries, bold initiatives transferred administrative responsibilities, funding, and resources from inefficient national bureaucracies to the state and local levels. Often, the reforms gave individual schools new tools that could be used to meet the specific educational needs of the communities they served, and in many cases, the new policies recognized the active role that parents should play as participants in the education of their children. (Please see Table 1 for a description of the various reform initiatives that were launched throughout the region during the decade.) Impressively, these widespread and far-reaching changes took place despite strong and vocal opposition from teachers' unions and other powerful groups that had a stake in the old system.

In her 2004 book *Despite the Odds*, Professor Merilee S. Grindle of Harvard University seeks to explain how education reform became an important item on the regional political agenda in the 1990s, how the new policies were crafted in the face of bitter hostility to change, how the reforms gained approval in a contentious political environment, and how the measures were put into practice. An examination of the experiences of Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador, and the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais allows Professor Grindle to draw a number of conclusions about the dynamics of education reform in Latin America in the 1990s that remain relevant for policy-makers today:

- Obstacles to change can be overcome with strong executive commitment to education reform, often as a part of a broader program of state modernization.

- Strategic decisions made by the design teams responsible for formulating reform policies can increase the likelihood of success.

- In seeking approval for their policies, reformers can choose to negotiate with their adversaries or to confront or ignore them, depending on local conditions, but their decision will have longer-term ramifications for the content and the viability of the reform program.

- Opposition to change does not disappear with the approval of new policies, and reformers often find they can exercise only limited control over the implementation of their initiatives.

These conclusions and other practical observations made in *Despite the Odds* will be outlined in greater detail in the pages that follow.

Table 1
Education Reform Initiatives in Latin America*

Country	Date	Substance of Reform	Extent of Implementation**
Argentina	1987	Transfer of primary schools to provinces	High
	1991	Transfer of secondary and remaining primary and vocational schools to provinces	High
	1993	National education law: responsibilities of national and provincial governments; curriculum reform; national testing of students	Moderate
Bolivia	1994	Institutional development of ministry of education	Moderate
		Curriculum reform	Moderate
		Teacher training and professionalization, new standards for hiring, promotion	Moderate
		Bilingual, girls', and rural education emphasis, school councils	Moderate
		National testing of students	Moderate
Brazil (dates vary by states)	1980s-1993	Financial autonomy of schools	High
	1990s	Democratization of selection of school principals	Moderate
	1983-1993	School councils	Moderate
	1988	National testing for students	High
	1991	Autonomy to municipal education systems	High
	1993	National ten-year plan for education	Moderate
Chile	1981	Devolution of administrative responsibility to municipalities	High
		Voucher system	High
	1990	Poverty reduction program	High
	1991	Recentralization of labor relations	High
	1993	Improved pedagogy	Moderate
	1995	Greater school autonomy	Moderate
	1997	Financial incentives for school performance	Moderate
Colombia	1989-1993	Decentralization to municipalities and school autonomy	Moderate
	1994	National education law strengthens departmental (state) role in education	Moderate
	1996	Incentive pay to teachers	Moderate
Costa Rica	1996	Commitment of 6% of GDP to education	Moderate
		More days of schooling	High
		Teacher pay linked to performance	Moderate
Dominican Republic	1997	National education law: decentralization/community participation; curriculum reform; teacher/school director training; national testing of students	Moderate
Ecuador	1996	New structure for basic education	Moderate
		New pedagogical model	Low
	1998	Decentralization	Low
		Parent councils	Low
		Teacher evaluation	Low
	1999	Family subsidies	Suspended
El Salvador	1991	Decentralization of rural schools, community councils, school autonomy	Moderate
	1996	National education law	Moderate
		Teacher career	Low

Guatemala	1991	National education law	Low
	1993	National education development program	Moderate
		Infrastructure and textbooks, parent councils	
	1994	Decentralization	?
Honduras	1995	Decentralization	?
	1996	National education law	Low
		National education improvement plan	Low
Mexico	1992	Decentralization to state level	High
		Parent councils	Low
		Career ladder for teachers	Moderate/low
		Curriculum reform	Moderate
Nicaragua	1991	Parent councils	Moderate
		Curriculum reform (textbooks)	High
	1993	School autonomy	Moderate
Panama	1997	Regional and local school councils	Moderate
Peru	1992	Decentralization to municipal councils	Suspended
		Municipal council manages labor relations	Suspended
		Voucher system	Suspended
		National testing of students	Suspended
Uruguay	1995	Expansion of schooling	Moderate
		Teacher training	Moderate
		Curriculum reform	Moderate
Venezuela	1989	Decentralization to states	Low
	1990	Teachers' career	Moderate
		Public funds for private education	High

*The table includes "meaningful" reforms – those whose purpose was to introduce significant changes in the education system – as well as those that were more symbolic than real. Inclusion in the table does not imply successful implementation of the initiative.
**Extent of implementation is an estimate of the degree to which a reform had been put in practice by the end of the decade. It does not refer to the degree to which the changes have actually improved the quality of education delivered.

Source: Table 1.2, Merilee S. Grindle, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 9-10.

Assessing the Obstacles to Change: The Apparent Odds Against Reform

For advocates of education reform in Latin America in the 1990s, the need for change was obvious. To be sure, the expansion of national educational systems that had taken place since World War II had resulted in greatly increased enrollment figures and dramatically reduced illiteracy rates. In 1950, 42 percent of the region's people had been unable to read and write. By 1990, that figure had dropped to just 15 percent, and by 2000 it had declined further, to just 12 percent. However, by the last decade of the twentieth century, it was clear that Latin American schools were not successfully preparing students for productive lives in an increasingly competitive global economy. In a number of countries, dropout rates were high, and students frequently were required to repeat grades. As a result, many pupils failed to complete their primary education. A 1989 study found that only 38 percent of Dominican children completed the sixth grade. The problem was even more acute in Brazil, where only 35 percent of children reached that point in their education, and in Nicaragua, where a mere 19 percent of the country's children graduated from primary school. Moreover, international test results in which the achievement of Latin American students was compared with that of children in other parts of the world demonstrated that the quality of instruction in the region's schools was generally very low.

Data also suggested that education in the region was still inequitably provided, with the rich having better access to schools than the poor. School completion rates were substantially, often dramatically, higher for the well-off, for city dwellers, and for white and mestizo populations than they were for the poor, for inhabitants of rural areas, and for indigenous peoples. In order for education to serve as an effective tool in the fight against poverty in the region, not only would the quality of instruction have to be enhanced, but steps would have to be taken to

ensure that the poorest Latin Americans would be able to take advantage of the improved services.

Would-be reformers also pointed to the inefficient administration of the region's education systems as evidence that change was desperately needed. In almost every country, national education ministries monopolized control over curricula, textbooks, the allocation of resources, and even minor personnel matters. As a result, teachers and school directors found themselves powerless to implement ideas of their own or to resolve problems and disputes at the local level. Centralization placed a great distance between administrators and what was occurring in the classroom, and bureaucrats in national capitals often lacked even basic information about the schools they managed. Critics called for the creation of a new administrative structure for Latin American educational systems in which local authorities, schools, and parents would play a greater role.

Unfortunately, the fact that reform was needed did not necessarily mean that change would take place. Indeed, despite clear signs that the region's educational systems were broken, the political forces arrayed against reform appeared far stronger than those that supported new policies. The opponents of reform included bureaucrats in education ministries who feared that they would lose important responsibilities and, more significantly, teachers' unions, which resisted the loss of benefits, jobs, and security. Ominously for reform advocates, the teachers' unions were among the most powerful organizations in many Latin American countries, so their determined opposition posed a serious danger to the viability of proposals for change. While schoolchildren and their parents, employers who needed skilled workers, and society at large would gain from a revision of education policies, the beneficiaries of change were unorganized and poorly informed about the advantages of reform. Therefore, their ability to influence outcomes in the political arena was severely limited. It appeared likely that teachers' unions and their allies would be

able to use their access to policy-making circles and their dominance of national education bureaucracies to preserve the status quo.

Getting Education Reform onto the Agenda: The Importance of Executive Commitment

However, despite the apparent odds against reform, changes *did* take place throughout the region. In every case studied by Professor Grindle, the process of bringing about change began with an effort to make education reform a significant item on the national agenda, and in every case, it was the firm commitment of a key executive figure that made education reform an important political issue. In Mexico, it was the president who led the drive for reform, in Bolivia, the reform initiative was stymied until the president gave it his strong support, while in Ecuador, Minas Gerais, and Nicaragua, the education minister played the leading role in placing change on the agenda. (Please see Table 2 for a brief summary of the reform proposals put forward in the five cases examined in *Despite the Odds.*) Although these leaders recognized that change would be politically difficult, they placed a high priority on enacting education reforms because they saw them as essential prerequisites for national prosperity, poverty reduction, and the modernization of their countries. Even if the obstacles to change within their nations appeared formidable, studies by international agencies and the attention that was then being given to the issue by multilateral funding agencies contributed to a growing global consensus on the importance of education to economic and social development. This consensus was one of the factors that encouraged Latin American leaders to undertake reform.

Table 2
Five Cases of Education Reform in the 1990s

Case	Year	Most Important Aspects
Minas Gerais	1991	▪ Decentralization (school autonomy) ▪ Teacher/director professionalization ▪ Local councils ▪ Testing
Mexico	1992	▪ Decentralization (states) ▪ Teacher professionalization ▪ Curriculum/pedagogy
Nicaragua	1993	▪ Decentralization (school autonomy) ▪ Local councils/parental fees ▪ Curriculum/pedagogy
Bolivia	1994	▪ Decentralization (municipalities) ▪ Teacher professionalization ▪ Curriculum/pedagogy ▪ Testing
Ecuador	1999	▪ Decentralization ▪ Teacher professionalization ▪ Social protection

Source: Table 1.3, Merilee S. Grindle, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 24.

In order to place reform on the political agenda, Latin American presidents and education ministers used a variety of strategies. Some executives **campaigned on a platform that included education reform** while seeking election, and thus they entered office with a popular mandate to bring about change. In all of the cases examined in *Despite the Odds*, reformist executives sought to **set the terms of debate** and to **manage the timing** of their proposals in a way that increased the likelihood of success. They also **appointed supporters** of reform to key bureaucratic positions in which they would be able to exert influence over education policy. The process of bringing education reform onto the national agenda also often included efforts to **weaken or marginalize opposition** to change. A brief look at the first stages of the reform process in Mexico, Bolivia, Minas Gerais, Nicaragua, and Ecuador illustrates the ways in which these strategies were employed:

- In **Mexico**, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari **weakened opposition** to education reform by exploiting divisions in the national teachers' union, the SNTE. Although the organization was extremely powerful, preexisting internal tensions within the union allowed Salinas to engineer the removal of the group's longtime chief and to install a new leader more beholden to him. Salinas also carefully **managed the timing** of reform. Although he took office in 1988, he did not move forward with plans for change in the education sector until 1991, when mid-term elections gave him the large legislative majority he would need to enact major reforms. Moreover, by then, the president had been able to gain a degree of leverage in his dealings with the SNTE that he had lacked at the beginning of his term. Finally, Salinas **appointed loyal allies** to strategic positions in the bureaucracy. His first education minister, Manuel Bartlett, was charged with reclaiming presidential control over his ministry, which had long been dominated by the teachers' union. When Salinas was ready to push ahead with his reform program, he appointed a more conciliatory figure, Ernesto Zedillo, to see his initiatives through.

- In **Bolivia**, activists who had been pushing for education reform for nearly ten years were only able to achieve results after an advocate of change, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, won the presidency in 1993. Sánchez de Lozada had **made education reform a significant part of his campaign platform**. His party's manifesto emphasized the importance of change in the education sector to the modernization of Bolivia. After taking office, the new president **weakened the capacity of the education bureaucracy to oppose reform** by merging it into a new super-ministry of human resources, and he **appointed a committed reformer**, Amalia Anaya, to head a new reform

unit. He also **managed the timing** of the reform initiative, winning easy legislative approval for his program early in his term, while he could still count on the firm support of a recently formulated governing coalition.

- In **Minas Gerais**, it was the state education minister, Walfrido Mares Guia Neto, who led the effort to place reform on the political agenda. As the campaign coordinator during his boss's race for the governorship, Mares Guia Neto had **designed an electoral platform that emphasized the need for education reform** and for the decentralization of the state's school system. Because Mares Guia Neto had studied education issues so carefully during the campaign and during the transition period that followed the election, and because he could count on the firm support of his personal friend, the governor, he was able to **manage the timing** of reform effectively, moving quickly to enact his program after taking office as minister. Despite criticism from the unions, the minister was able to **weaken the opposition** and to **set the terms of debate** by speaking knowledgeably of the shortcomings of the educational system in the state. He also increased the odds of success by **appointing a reformer** as his vice-minister and charging her and her team with oversight of the reform process. Reform legislation passed in June 1991, less than six months after Mares Guia Neto had taken office.

- In **Nicaragua**, education minister Humberto Belli dramatically **set the terms of debate** on education reform in 1993 by introducing a far-reaching plan that would give individual schools a high degree of autonomy. The minister also **weakened opposition** to his decentralization efforts by encouraging the formation of a new teachers' union that would compete with the dominant ANDEN organization. The new union then splintered, leaving the fragmented

teachers' groups much less able to resist change. Belli also **managed the timing** of reform by choosing to implement his policies gradually, which served as a way of lessening the extent of protest against them. At first, only a small handful of Nicaraguan schools were organized as "autonomous" institutions, which were overseen by councils of parents, teachers, and directors.

- In **Ecuador**, where reforms ultimately failed to be enacted, President Jamil Mahuad **campaigned on a platform emphasizing the importance of education** in 1998, and he **appointed a reform advocate**, Rosángela Adoum, to serve as minister of education. The government even secured international funding for reform programs that functioned as separate units within the education ministry. However, faced with a hostile congress and a deteriorating economic situation, Mahuad and the reformers were unable to weaken or marginalize the opponents of change, which included both the large national teachers' union and bureaucrats who resented the resources accorded to the government's reform teams. Reform efforts ended abruptly in January 2000, when the Mahuad administration was overthrown in a military coup. The Ecuadorian experience suggests that change can be impossible when a beleaguered government facing challenges in many areas must confront determined opponents of reform. Given the growing instability in Ecuador in the late 1990s, President Mahuad and his team lacked the room for maneuver that their counterparts in other countries enjoyed.

Getting education reform onto the political agenda was an essential first step towards change. Given the central role played by executives in setting the parameters for policy discussions in Latin America, it is hardly surprising that a

commitment to reform on the part of presidents and education ministers was a prerequisite for reform. Because some powerful interests opposed change, however, the success of proposals for reform was far from assured. The fate of the initiatives championed by reformist officials depended greatly on the strategic decisions they made.

Crafting Policies and Setting the Stage for Reform: The Role of the Design Team

The task of overseeing reform did not fall to presidents and education ministers alone, however. Indeed, in most cases, it was a "design team" of officials and technical advisors that actually determined the content and structure of reform programs. While the group that worked with Education Minister Belli in Nicaragua played only a supporting role in the reform process there, an examination of the experiences of design teams in Bolivia, Minas Gerais, Mexico, and Ecuador yields a number of useful insights.

First of all, design teams appear to have been most effective when they were formed as **a single, unified, cohesive group** with shared views on the importance of reform and the direction it should take. In Bolivia, the fact that a like-minded group under the leadership of Amalia Anaya had been actively promoting education reform for years made it easy for the design team there to agree on new policies once President Sánchez de Lozada gave them the opportunity to put their ideas into action. In Minas Gerais, too, the team that was assembled by Mares Guia Neto quickly came to a consensus regarding the steps that should be taken to reshape the state's school system. The group of officials, researchers, and school directors that Mares Guia Neto and his associates brought together all agreed on the desirability of decentralization, and thus they were able to formulate a basic blueprint for change even before the new education minister took office. The cohesion and shared vision of the design team facilitated fast action by the state government.

By contrast, in Ecuador, the presence of *competing* design teams helped to doom the reform project to failure. There, two different reform programs functioned simultaneously within the education ministry. Although both of the teams had a clear vision of the changes they wished to bring about, the rivalry that existed between the two groups made it difficult for either one to be effective. While political instability and the weakness of the Mahuad administration were the most important factors behind the failure of education reform efforts in Ecuador, the lack of a single, unified policy design team also hurt the reformers' chances for success.

Design teams could also increase their effectiveness by **building networks** with reform-minded groups and individuals both within their own countries and abroad. Bolivian reform leader Anaya consciously created ties with members of different political parties and with officials in different parts of the bureaucracy. These contacts helped to broaden the base of support for reform. Anaya also attended a variety of international conferences on education, thus establishing links with institutions such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Those networks proved helpful later, when the Bolivian government sought funding for reform from foreign donors.

Ecuador also benefited from international reformist networks, but the way in which the support from abroad was structured undermined the cause of change. The World Bank funded the work of one design team, while the Inter-American Development Bank backed another. As noted above, neither of the two competing groups was able to prevail over the other, much less over the powerful opponents of reform. Better management of the country's pro-reform networks might have increased the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Furthermore, it is clear that the team's **position within the bureaucracy** could have important ramifications for its effectiveness. In Bolivia, the education ministry's staunch opposition to change initially made it necessary for the design

team to be attached to the planning ministry. There, the group enjoyed the support of the minister but faced constant sniping from the education bureaucracy. Concluding that reform could only move forward if it originated within the education ministry, President Sánchez de Lozada moved the team there, but only after improving the environment for reform in by appointing a reformist education minister and merging the department into a new super-ministry of human resources. In Ecuador, the work of the design teams in the education ministry was stymied not only by their rivalry with one another but also by the resentment felt towards them by those of their colleagues in the ministry who were not part of internationally funded programs. In part because members of the teams earned higher salaries and had greater access to resources than their peers, the rest of the ministry was determined to undermine their work. Thus, the awkward, isolated placement of the design teams within the Ecuadorian bureaucracy was yet another obstacle to reform there.

The design teams' practice of **limiting access to their discussions** was an important way of shielding the reformers from opposition during the policy formulation stage of the reform process. In effect, the design teams acted as gatekeepers in terms of which individuals and groups had access to the discussion of reforms as they were being designed. In several cases, the discussions were only minimally inclusive, and reaching decisions behind relatively closed doors left reformers vulnerable to unanticipated public objections to their proposals. In Bolivia, for example, one reason for the hostility of the unions to the planned change was their belief that they had been excluded from discussions about it. In Mexico, reformers worked without public input on plans for a revision of the country's textbooks, but they were forced into a hasty retreat when nationalist critics strongly protested the team's reinterpretation of certain aspects of Mexican history.

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Finally, the design teams' **dependence on executive leadership and support** highlights once again the importance of a commitment to change on the part of presidents and ministers. In Bolivia, despite the constant activity of reform advocates over a period of several years, it was only when presidents took an interest in educational issues that their proposals made any headway, and when presidents lost interest or were distracted by other matters, the reformers' initiatives were stalled. In Minas Gerais, the design team benefited from the strong backing of the education minister, and the governor's statements of support for reform ensured prompt legislative approval of the team's program. Just as executive support for change was necessary to get education reform onto national political agendas, so too was executive support for the work of policy design teams necessary to ensure the success of their proposals.

Managing Opposition to Reform: Confrontation and Negotiation with Teachers' Unions

Although the effectiveness of a design team could be enhanced or reduced depending on the extent to which it was cohesive, well connected with other actors, well placed within the bureaucracy, and supported by executive officials, the phase of the reform process in which these groups formulated reform initiatives was generally one in which advocates of change were able to control the pace of policy discussions and to determine the content of proposed reform measures. When their initiatives were made public, however, much of this control was lost, as other groups sought to reshape or to scuttle proposals for change. Teachers' unions generally emerged as the most vocal and the most active opponents of reform. They often responded to reform initiatives by calling strikes, by demanding better salaries and benefits, by protesting their exclusion from the reform process, by putting forward their own proposals for limited change, and by claiming that the government's new policies represented a neoliberal plot to privatize education.

Reformers dealt with the unions' opposition in a variety of ways. In Mexico and Minas Gerais, advocates of change opted to negotiate with the teachers, while in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, they chose to ignore or to confront the unions. The decision between negotiation and confrontation did not depend on the strength of the opposition in each place. Indeed, unions demonstrated a strong capacity to launch disruptive protests in all five settings. Rather, the choice depended on the place of the unions in the political and social landscape of each country and on the way in which reformers assessed the constraints they faced in each case.

- In **Mexico**, for example, President Salinas opted for **negotiation** with the SNTE in large part because the powerful teachers' union had close, longstanding ties with his party, the PRI. He felt that the union had to be allowed some role in the reform process not just because it was the dominant labor organization in the education sector, but also because it had traditionally served as one of the underpinnings of the PRI's power in Mexico. His negotiations with the union allowed decentralization of the country's school system to go forward, although he did compromise with the SNTE by agreeing that teacher salaries would continue to be determined at the national level in annual talks between the union and the government. The result was a reform program that did not go as far as some had wanted, but because of the president's decision to negotiate, a potentially bitter conflict with opponents of change was averted.

- In **Minas Gerais**, also, Education Minister Mares Guia Neto opted for **negotiation** with the local teachers' union, the UTE. There, however, the union was relatively weak, and the group's political affiliation with a leftist party, the PT, was not of great concern to the administration. Thus, the

reformers' decision to negotiate was not based on a recognition of the ferocity of the opposition to change. Instead, the government chose to engage the UTE in a dialogue precisely because it knew that it could negotiate from a position of strength. Although union leaders were frustrated by Mares Guia Neto's inflexibility on a number of points that he considered essential to his program, the minister's willingness to grant increased pay and benefits to teachers during the negotiations helped to win a certain degree of goodwill from the union and to reduce the intensity of opposition to the reform proposals.

- On the other hand, in **Bolivia**, political factors contributed to the reformers' decision to **confront** the unions that opposed change. In Bolivia the teachers' unions were tied to small leftist parties that had a long tradition of conflict with the government. Suspicion and distrust between the administration and the teachers ran deep, and the government did not depend on the teachers' allies for support in the legislature. Therefore, Bolivian reformers pushed ahead with their initiatives despite the bitter opposition of the unions, even threatening to fire teachers who refused to end a long strike. With public opinion turning against the teachers and their protests, the government prevailed, but the intensity of its conflict with the unions bode ill for the implementation of the reform program.

- In **Nicaragua**, too, the government's strategy of **confrontation** was determined largely by party politics. The primary purpose of Education Minister Belli's 1993 reform program was to remove the influence of the defeated Sandinista regime from the country's schools. Thus, negotiation or dialogue with the Sandinista-dominated ANDEN teachers' union would be

impossible. Instead, Belli encouraged the formation of a rival union, and he pushed ahead with his reform program by appealing directly to local schools and to individual teachers, leaving the unions on the sidelines.

- Finally, in **Ecuador**, the government attempted to **ignore** the teachers' organization, UNE, when it sent a reform proposal to congress in 1998 without consulting the union. Its decision not to negotiate with UNE had been based on the very reasonable assumption that the intransigent union, with its ties to a far-left, anti-government party, would have been unwilling to make any concessions. The union's protests against the 1998 reform initiative contributed to the defeat of the proposed legislation, but given the intensity of the conflict between UNE and the administration, it is hard to see how the situation might have been handled more successfully.

With the exception of the case of Ecuador, reformers in all of these countries succeeded in gaining passage of their initiatives. In Mexico and Minas Gerais, negotiation had resulted in some compromises with opponents of change, while in Nicaragua and Bolivia, officials had forged ahead with their programs despite the objections of the teachers' unions. However, advocates of change would soon learn that the struggle over reform did not end with the promulgation of new laws.

Implementing Education Reforms: New Arenas for Conflict

As the new policies were implemented, unions continued to resist their marginalization, and as the scene of reform shifted away from arenas of 'high politics' in national capitals to more local levels, new actors became involved in shaping the outcome of reform measures. Although reformers discovered to their chagrin that the fate of their initiatives was largely out of their hands during this

phase of the reform process, some found that there were ways to increase the chances that their policies would be implemented successfully. By controlling the **timing** of policy implementation, by initially making some of the proposed changes **voluntary**, by providing **incentives** for teachers to accept reforms, and by helping to **build the capacity** of actors on the local level to implement the new policies, the architects of decentralization and other quality-enhancing reforms could improve the odds that their ideas would actually be put into practice.

The **timing** of reform was often determined by the strategy that reformers had chosen to use in their dealings with opponents of change. In **Mexico** and **Minas Gerais**, where the governments had negotiated and reached an understanding with the most vocal critics of reform proposals, it was judged that the most effective implementation strategy would be one in which changes to the educational system would be made **all at once**. Thus, throughout Minas Gerais, elections for school directorships were held and local boards to oversee school activities were formed within a short period after the passage of Mares Guia Neto's program. Similarly, in Mexico, much of the responsibility for school administration was passed down to the state level immediately after the enactment of reforms there.

By contrast, in **Bolivia** and **Nicaragua**, reformers still faced stronger opposition to their policies as a result of their decision to confront the teachers' unions. Obviously, implementation of reforms would be impossible without the cooperation of teachers, so officials decided to put the new policies into action **gradually**. In Bolivia, individual schools were targeted for a slow process of "transformation," through which new curricula and teaching methods would be introduced over a number of years, one grade level at a time. Likewise, in Nicaragua, the introduction of autonomous schools began very slowly; in the first year of the new program, only twenty urban high schools adopted the new model, under which local councils of teachers and parents assumed some responsibility for

the administration of a school. The program expanded gradually in subsequent years.

Another way to overcome lingering opposition to change was to make participation in reform programs **voluntary** at first. This approach was adopted in **Nicaragua**, where individual schools were allowed to choose whether or not to form the councils that would transform them into autonomous institutions. Education Minister Belli concluded that teachers would be more committed to the new model if they took part in the decision to adopt it, through a vote in their own schools. To encourage skeptical teachers to make that decision, the Nicaraguan government offered an **incentive**: the prospect of an increased salary in an autonomous school. Although the success of the reform as a quality-enhancing measure remains open to debate, the implementation strategy has been successful; by the end of 1999, 40.1 percent of the schools, 68.5 percent of the students, and 62 percent of the students in the country were participating in the autonomous school program.

Finally, given the vastness of the new responsibilities that were being delegated to the state, local, and school levels as a result of these reforms, it would clearly be important to offer resources and support that would **build the capacity** of administrators and teachers to implement the new policies effectively. Capacity building efforts were a significant part of the implementation strategies adopted in Minas Gerais, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. In **Bolivia**, for example, teachers went through new training program as their schools were "transformed."

Whether or not reformers had reached a negotiated settlement with their opponents, they found that they had to give careful thought to the process of implementing their programs. Opposition to the restructuring of educational system did not end with the adoption of new policies. Moreover, during the implementation stage, the fate of reform rested in the hands of a diffuse group of regional and local officials, teachers, and school administrators, whose ability and enthusiasm for

change could not be taken for granted. During this phase of the process, the most effective advocates of reform remained active in pressing for change, and they took creative steps to see their programs through.

Conclusions

The enactment of far-reaching education reforms in Latin America in the 1990s was an important achievement, especially considering the intensity of the opposition faced by many of the proposals for change that were put forward during the decade. Professor Grindle's analysis of the reform processes that took place in Mexico, Minas Gerais, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador helps us to understand how it was possible for quality enhancing reforms to be introduced within educational systems in the region. (Please see Figure 1 for an overview of the stages of the reform process as outlined in *Despite the Odds*.) Among the most important conclusions to be drawn from these five reform experiences are the following:

- A reform initiative should be understood as a dynamic political process that unfolds over time. At each stage of the process, complex chains of decisions and interactions between advocates and opponents of change influenced the shape and content of the reform program. This means that an initiative was not doomed to failure simply because the would-be beneficiaries of reform were weak while those who resisted change were powerful. Rather, the experiences described in *Despite the Odds* show that well organized opposition can be overcome if reformers make appropriate strategic decisions.

- Reforms did not occur only when they were pressed upon decision makers by politically mobilized interests. Indeed, in many Latin American settings, specific proposals for reform were formulated by governmental design teams

and were championed by modernization-minded presidents and ministers, often in the absence of mobilized pressure for change. In fact, interest groups were generally reactive rather than proactive in the process of defining changes. At least during the 1990s, the initiative for reform came from within governments, and there was not an effectively mobilized constituency calling for a restructuring of the educational system. Forward-looking executives had to provide leadership on this issue.
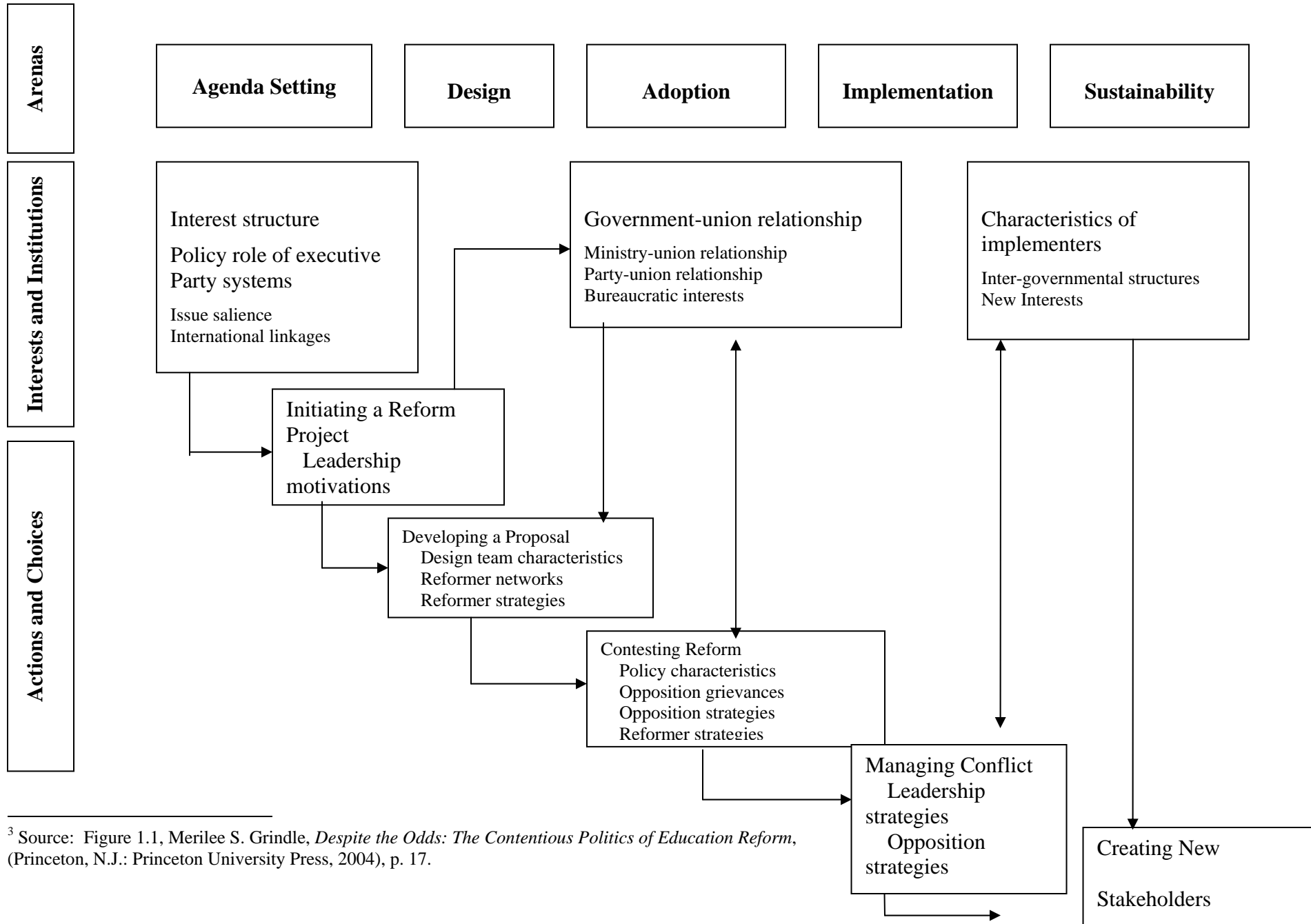
- Advocates of change had the widest scope for undermining opposition and promoting new policies while they were engaged in making education an important issue on national political agendas and while they were designing new policies. Once new initiatives were announced, however, reformers typically lost some capacity to manage the political destinies of their proposals. Therefore, reform-minded officials must take full advantage of the early phases of the reform process, and they must be prepared to address the criticisms and to counter the attacks that they will inevitably face once their programs are made public.

- Strategic choices about timing affected the outcome of many reform initiatives. Reformers were able to select opportune moments for pushing ahead with change proposals, and they made strategic retreats when the timing was inauspicious for change. A keen awareness of the appropriate moment for reform is a prerequisite for a successful policy initiative.

- In some cases, funding agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank played were involved in education reform as part of an international network that promoted change. Sometimes, however,

their involvement in reform initiatives exacerbated bureaucratic rivalries. For example, officials in some countries resented the existence of privileged, well-funded reform units within governments, and in at least one case, the competition between two different internationally supported policy teams undermined the efforts of both groups. Therefore, international bodies should structure their aid for reform programs carefully so as to minimize the institutional tensions that their sponsorship might create. Moreover, to ensure that their resources are used effectively, these actors should take care to identify Latin American partners with the commitment to innovation and the executive support necessary for the successful implementation of new policies.

- Finally, changes were possible in part because the reforms of the 1990s did not necessarily pose a simple binary choice. In fact, some reform initiatives were negotiated agreements that allowed change to occur in the context of greater tolerance by the opposition. Although it might not be possible in every case, making an effort to find common ground with opponents of change can pay valuable dividends for reformers.

In light of the still pressing need for improvements in the quality of instruction provided to Latin American children, it is to be hoped that these findings will be of use to contemporary policy-makers who recognize the importance of education reform to the future of their countries.

Figure 1
The Process of Education Policy Reform[3]

Arenas				
Agenda Setting	**Design**	**Adoption**	**Implementation**	**Sustainability**

Interests and Institutions

Interest structure

Policy role of executive
Party systems

Issue salience
International linkages

Government-union relationship

Ministry-union relationship
Party-union relationship
Bureaucratic interests

Characteristics of implementers

Inter-governmental structures
New Interests

Actions and Choices

Initiating a Reform Project
   Leadership motivations

Developing a Proposal
   Design team characteristics
   Reformer networks
   Reformer strategies

Contesting Reform
   Policy characteristics
   Opposition grievances
   Opposition strategies
   Reformer strategies

Managing Conflict
   Leadership strategies
   Opposition strategies

Creating New Stakeholders

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[3] Source: Figure 1.1, Merilee S. Grindle, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 17.

The figure above provides an overview of the reform process as it took place in much of Latin America during the 1990s. As the chart shows, during the earliest stages of reform, the project was shaped primarily by such factors as the salience of the issue in a particular country and the policy role of the executive in that particular political system. As the process moved from the policy design stage to the policy adoption stage, relationships between the government and teachers' unions became more important. At this point, the executive and his design team lost some of their ability to control the dynamics of reform, as they confronted or negotiated with opponents of their proposals. Finally, when new policies were implemented, new forces entered the picture. Actors on the regional and local level often had significant influence on how reforms are put into practice, so reformers had to create alliances and provide incentives to ensure the sustainability of their initiatives.