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EDUCATION CAUGHT COVID-19

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Before the pandemic, education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) was highly unequal. Although the primary-school attendance rate has improved considerably, large attendance gaps remain in secondary school. In many cases, schools continue to exclude the poorest children. Now, the pandemic threatens to intensify the educational challenges of LAC.

In 2018, approximately four out of ten people did not finish school, and this was especially worse for countries like Honduras and El Salvador where the number increased to seven and six, respectively. Socioeconomic status also determines the chances of graduating from the educational system; in the poorest quintile, six out of ten young people do not graduate, compared to only two in the wealthiest quintile. After leaving school, many of these young people do not find job opportunities and join a group of young people who do not study or work in the region. Approximately 16 percent of young people between ages 15 and 24 do not work or study.¹

The education system was also of low quality. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in mathematics Latin America obtained an average of 100 points less than OECD countries. The difference in scores is equivalent to an educational gap of 2.5 school years.²

THE EFFECTS OF COVID ON EDUCATION

Remote Models Have Not Been Effective for Children's Learning

COVID-19 forced countries around the world to provide remote education; however, some

studies show that this new emergency model has not improved learning. In the Netherlands, it was found that eight weeks of confinement resulted in a decrease of approximately 3 percentile points in expected learning, and the losses were larger among students from less-educated homes.³ In Belgium, the results are similar; standardized tests show that 2020 students perform worse when compared to previous cohorts, especially in Dutch. In addition, the inequality of quality between schools increased between 17 and 20 percent for math and Dutch.⁴

In Latin America, studies on learning loss have been more limited. However, it is difficult to imagine that results could be better, considering European countries outperform LAC in PISA and also have better educational infrastructure than many LAC countries.

Many Students Will Not Return to School

A recent study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) predicts that, in LAC, approximately 1.2 million boys and girls between 6 and 17 years old will drop out of school mainly for two reasons: (1) the inability to adapt to the new learning conditions at home and (2) the economic crisis, which will force many families to take their children out of school.⁵

This number hides great social inequalities since, out of all students who will be excluded from the school system, 38 percent and 44 percent will be poor and from the lower-middle class, respectively. In terms of age group, young people between 15 and 17 years old will be the most affected by the crisis. In this group, the school non-attendance rate will increase to levels similar to those

in 2012, the equivalent of going back eight years in school coverage policies.

COVID-19 Will Leave a Scar on the Working Life of Young People

On the other hand, young people about to graduate of high school will enter a depressed job market. It is estimated that the number of young people between the ages of 18 and 23 who neither study nor work will increase by 3 million in the Latin American region, an increase of 21 percent compared to before the crisis. It is estimated that, in relative terms, the most affected countries are Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador.

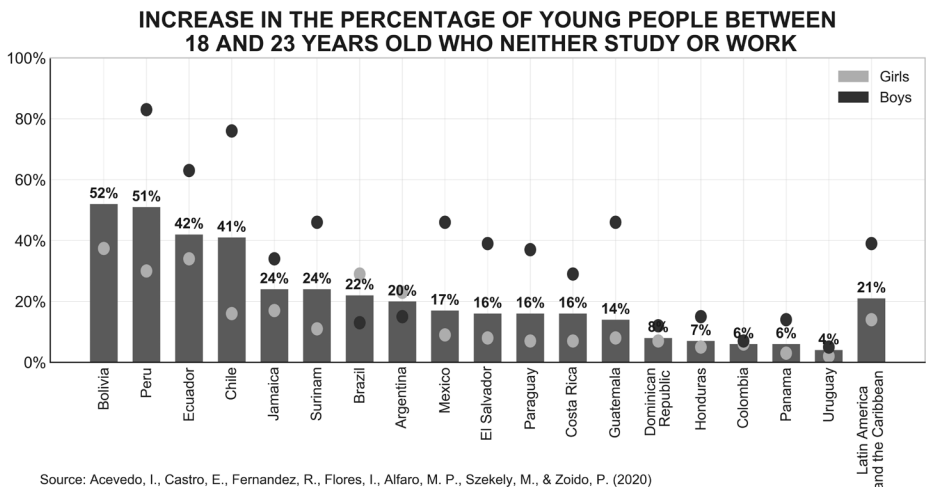
These young people will face worse opportunities compared to their peers. It is estimated that this poor entry into the labor market will affect their income level throughout their lives. Furthermore, this loss of income could be the equivalent of an estimated 8.7 percent for men and 3.4 percent for women in LAC during the next 20 years.

WHAT CAN COUNTRIES DO TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS?

The most appropriate policies will depend on the current conditions of the educational system and the particular effects of COVID-19 in each LAC country. Each country will have to measure and identify the educational costs of the pandemic, adapt the school content, train its teaching staff, and stimulate the educational demand with pre-existing social programs such as conditional transfers whenever possible. However, there is a series of points that each country should consider:

- Maintain the bond with students and parents. Due to the high vulnerability of some students, it is recommended that teachers and other teaching support personnel focus on accompanying learning through digital and personalized means. This type of support and guidance must be adapted to the contents of the curriculum and the most vulnerable households. In addition, the bond between the teacher and the parent should be strengthened so that both can mentor and monitor the children's learning. A recent study in Mexico showed that providing information to parents on how helping their children promotes

Figure 1. Increase in the Percentage of Young People between 18 and 23 Years Old Who Neither Study nor Work



Source: Acevedo, I., Castro, E., Fernandez, R., Flores, I., Alfaro, M.P., Szekely, M., and Zoido, P. (2020).

better student learning, a program that also appears to be cost-effective and especially useful for low-income families.⁶

- Ensure minimal conditions at the school for a gradual reopening. In the next school year, school re-openings will be reconsidered, and it is expected that LAC countries will eventually have access to the COVID-19 vaccine. However, it will be difficult for all people to have immediate access. School re-openings should therefore be gradual and guarantee biosecurity conditions. For this, countries must invest in and guarantee the supply of water, adequate spaces for social distancing, and hygiene products in schools.
- Integrate and strengthen the use of technology to improve learning. This is an opportunity to integrate new technologies in educational processes, especially of those platforms that allow adapting to the challenges of each student. In addition, many countries have invested in television and radio programs that could allow the transition to a hybrid education model until the crisis is overcome. In turn, this will require training for teachers to make the most of the technologies.

ENDNOTES

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Author Biography

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