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Education during the pandemic

An opportunity to transform education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean

Mariana Huepe
Amalia Palma
Daniela Trucco

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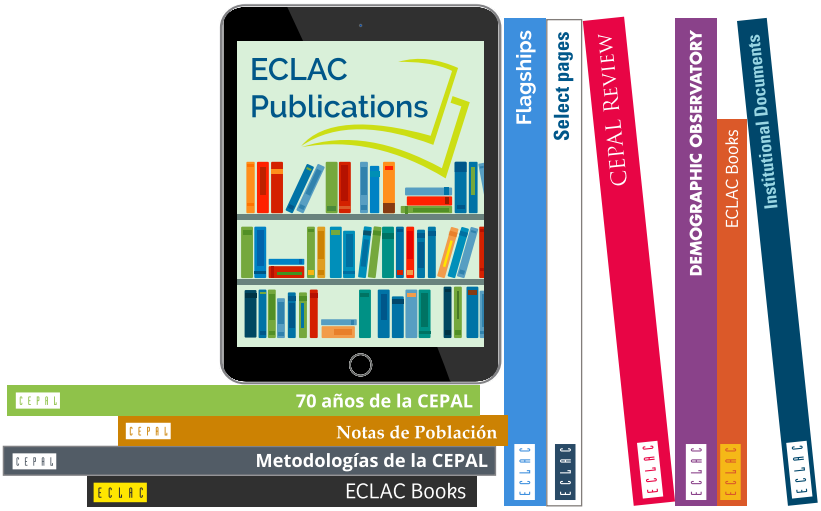

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This document was prepared by Mariana Huepe, Social Affairs Officer, Amalia Palma, Research Assistant, and Daniela Trucco, Senior Social Affairs Officer, of the Social Development Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), as part of the cooperation project between ECLAC and the Government of Norway entitled "Enhancing human capacities throughout the life cycle for equality and productivity".

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant a prolonged economic and social crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean, with profound consequences on the population's well-being and a silent and devastating impact on education. The abrupt transition to distance learning, with one of the most extended school closures in the world, has had an unequal impact and highlighted pre-existing gaps in the region. The crisis has resulted in paradigm shifts, innovations and lessons learned concerning adapting to remote education, which impede education systems from returning to how things were and force them to restructure to be more resilient and inclusive.

This document puts forward measures aimed at this educational transformation. First, ensuring the continuity of face-to-face classes and learning recovery for all is essential. To this end, it is vital to support the socioemotional well-being of students and the educational community, carry out diagnostic and formative assessments, establish remedial measures for learning recovery and implement targeted strategies for students at greater risk of disengaging from education and dropping out of school. Second, countries must tackle inequalities in education and ensure the right to inclusive and quality education. Accordingly, investment in education must increase, and the institutional conditions of schooling must be reorganised to support greater inclusion, which implies greater coordination with other public policy areas. Meanwhile, distance learning during the pandemic has offered valuable lessons that can extend learning times, reduce coverage gaps, and strengthen innovation processes. How educational and learning recovery strategies are implemented will shape the destiny of a generation.

Introduction

Education is a human right and a key factor in progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Investing in the education of the population is fundamental to achieving full social and labour inclusion at the individual level, contributing to equality and participation in society, and supporting countries' economic growth. The more years of education a country's population has, the greater the association with reduced poverty and inequality and improved health indicators, as well as with increased opportunities for access to decent work, upward social mobility and expanded opportunities for citizenship. Education is, therefore, key to building the capacities required for the structural change required in Latin America and the Caribbean towards sustainable and equitable development (ECLAC, 2022a).

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 26), education is a human right. Subsequent international treaties expanded the concept, stating that education must guarantee non-discrimination, be child-centred and promote the child's best interests (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). As a human right, education aims to foster the development of skills, abilities and learning to promote human dignity, self-confidence and self-esteem. In 2015, United Nations member countries committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030, including SDG4: "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*" (UNESCO, 2015) (see box 1). Educational challenge, therefore, pertain not only to access, but also to learning and progression through school, leaving no one behind (United Nations, 2005).

Recognising that education is a foundation for peace, tolerance, human rights and sustainable development, in September 2022 the Secretary-General of the United Nations announced to the United Nations General Assembly, in his report Our Common Agenda, his intention to convene a Transforming Education Summit. The Summit aimed to mobilise political ambition, action, solidarity and solutions to transform education by 2030 and based its work on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization document "Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education" (UNESCO, 2021a). This document underscores the need to urgently rethink the future of education in a changing world and an uncertain future.

Box 1
Summary of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals

ODS4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	**4.1.** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. **4.3.** By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university. **4.5.** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations. **4.7.** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on United Nations (2018).

To respond not only to the new demands generated by technology, the automation of work and the environment, but also to effectively fulfil many of the unfulfilled promises of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, UNESCO (2021a) highlights the need to generate systemic changes and proposes a new social contract around the role of education at the global level. The report takes education as a public good and a public right as its starting point and proposes two central themes around which to think —and act— in the future: (i) ensuring the right to lifelong education, and (ii) strengthening education as a public and common good. Since education during the twentieth century played a key role in the development of countries and the consolidation of nation states, mainly through compulsory schooling, UNESCO urgently calls for a reimagining of the way forward for education in the face of three major challenges for the future: environmental protection, changes in the world of work and advances in technology. The commission responsible for the report, therefore, poses three questions to be answered by 2050 when reimagining education: *What should we continue? What should we stop? What needs to be created from square one?*

In line with the international call to put education at the centre of the debate, this document strives to advance this vision for the Latin American and Caribbean region as an opportunity to restructure education to create more inclusive and resilient systems. Doing so is even more important at this historic moment, when the COVID-19 pandemic has meant a prolonged health and social crisis in the region that has significantly, negatively, and silently affected education. The pandemic's consequences on education are significant and increase pre-existing inequalities, which jeopardise the progress made in recent decades and move the region away from meeting the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The first chapter of this document addresses the immediate impact of the pandemic on education systems. It is argued that the prolonged school closures have had a devastating impact on children and adolescents. The alternatives and capacity to continue learning remotely were not evenly distributed across the population, and therefore the impact on educational attainments has also been uneven, widening existing gaps in the region from before the pandemic. But, at the same time, the abrupt transition to non-classroom-based education provided an opportunity for innovation from which experiences and lessons should be drawn.

The second chapter discusses how the pandemic threatens to deepen educational gaps in the region, especially in terms of learning. The prolonged crisis revealed the central role of socioemotional and digital skills, as well as the role of support figures (teachers and caregivers) in learning processes. The

chapter highlights the need for diagnostic and formative assessments to better understand the extent of learning loss and design appropriate recovery strategies.

The third chapter discusses the vital role of the financial sustainability of education systems to implement the transformations required to address the urgency of this crisis. The chapter argues that there was already a funding crisis in the region prior to the pandemic. Overall, the region met the minimums agreed in the SDG 4 Framework for Action, but with considerable heterogeneity between countries and insufficient funding when considering per capita amounts. In the aftermath of the pandemic, there are new investment needs related to urgent actions required for learning recovery and the implementation of early warning systems, among other measures. Expanded educational investment is needed as well as efforts to strengthen institutions for an efficient and equitable use of resources.

The fourth and final chapter of this document outlines the main recommendations for taking advantage of this opportunity to transform education in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, the chapter addresses the most urgent measures required to ensure continuity of face-to-face learning and learning recovery leaving no one behind. On the other hand, it discusses the need to tackle inequalities in education and ensure the right to inclusive and quality education. The chapter also points out that education cannot be solved by the education sector alone and that coordination with other public policy sectors is required. Lessons to be drawn from the pandemic experience are put forward, along with the argument that the focus of the education system should be on skills formation. The leap that has been made in terms of digitalisation must be leveraged to benefit schools and education by strengthening teaching-learning processes and educational management. It is important to put this area on the recovery agenda and agree on a new social pact for education, one that is broad with a long-term strategic vision.

I. The immediate impact of the pandemic on the region's education systems

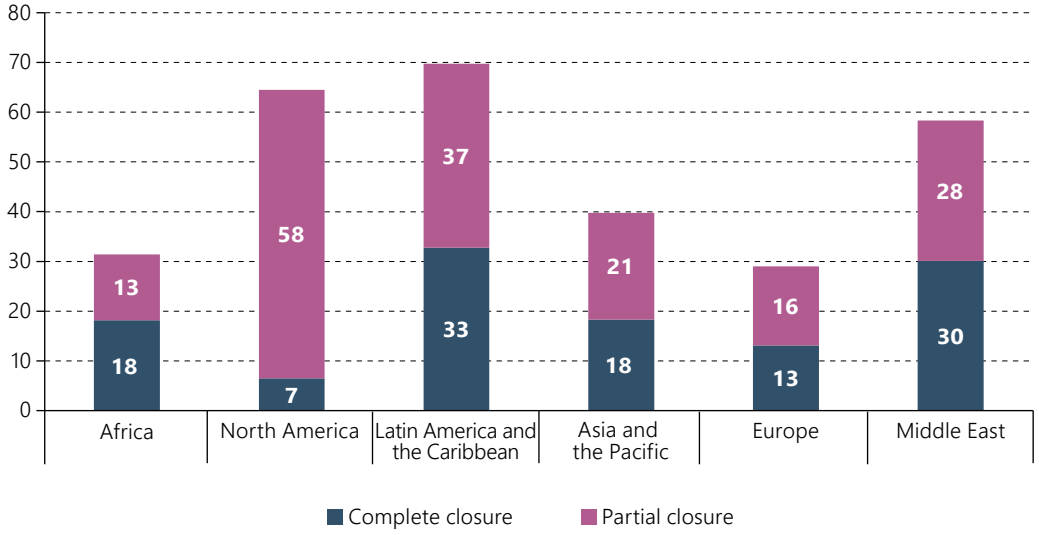
A. Schoolchildren in the region were among the hardest hit by the suspension of face-to-face classes

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global health, economic and social crisis. One of the first measures taken by countries to address the health emergency and control the spread of the disease was to close schools, thus suspending face-to-face classes in almost all Latin American and Caribbean countries for extended periods of time. This measure affected around 150 million students in the school system (pre-primary to upper secondary) of the region and lasted for very long periods, reaching up to two academic years of interruption in some countries.

According to official data published by UNESCO, on average the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean suspended face-to-face classes totally or partially for 70 school weeks from February 2020 to March 2022. This was the equivalent of more than one and a half academic years (the school year ranges between 38 and 42 weeks depending on the country), and even up to two academic years in some countries. This represents quite an extended period, even more so considering that the overall average was 41 weeks.

Compared to other regions of the world, Latin America and the Caribbean has been among the regions where this measure has lasted the longest. Despite having on average comparable figures to those of North America for partial or total suspension of face-to-face classes, at over one and a half school years, in North America closures were mainly partial. Meanwhile, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the total closure period was significantly longer than anywhere else in the world, with an average of 33 weeks of total closure combined with an average of 37 weeks of partial closure (see figure 1).

Figure 1
Time of complete or partial school closures (primary and secondary education) from 16 February 2020 to 31 March 2022
(In number of weeks)

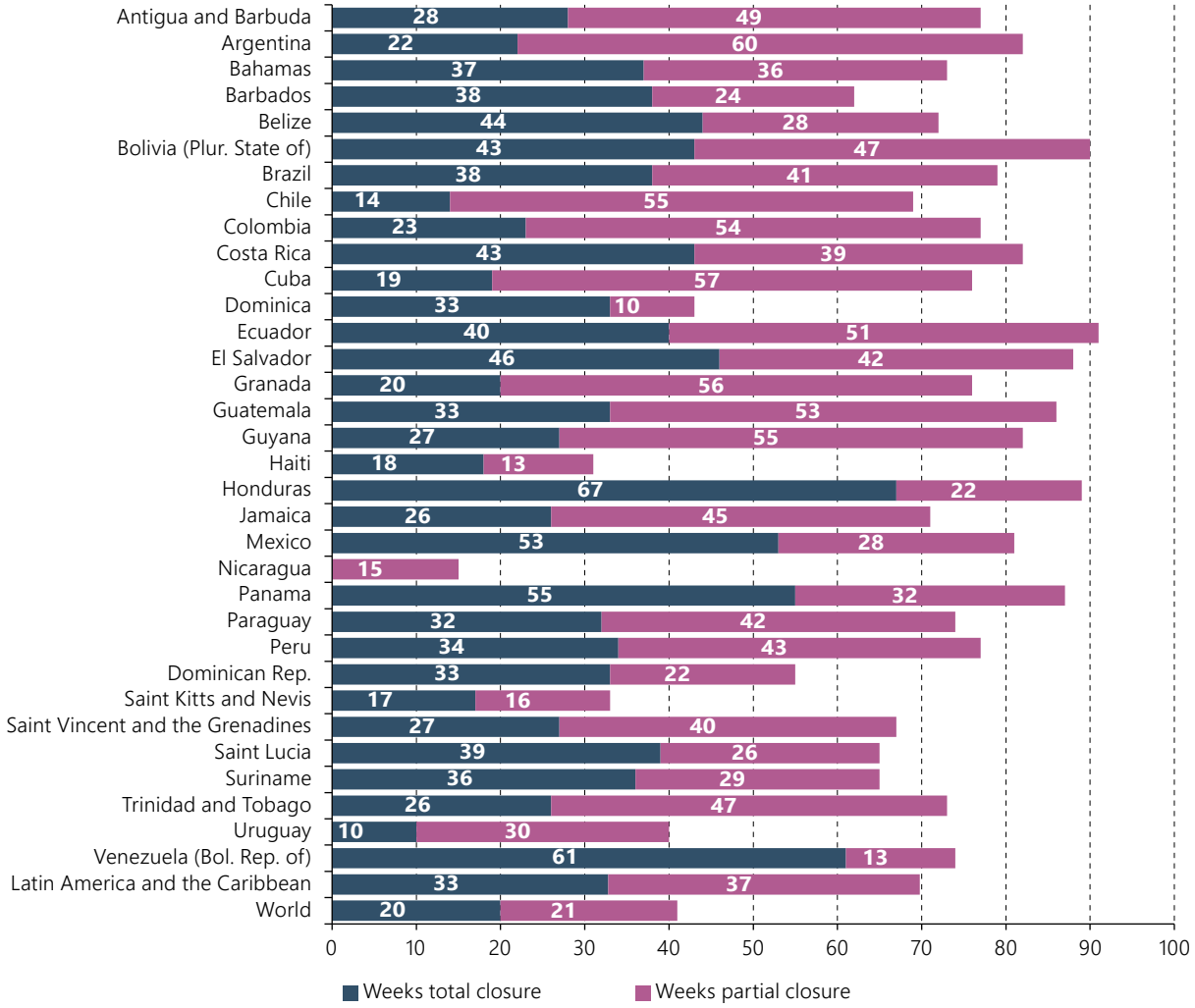


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [Online] https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/data.

Considering the size of the student population from pre-primary to upper secondary in each country (more than 148 million students in the region), 96% of this population (approximately 143 million students) was affected by the suspension of face-to-face classes for at least one academic year (40 weeks) and 40% of them (more than 60 million students) for two or more academic years of partial or total suspension of face-to-face classes (80 weeks or more). As can be seen in figure 2, the countries that extended these measures for the longest time were Ecuador, with a total of 91 weeks (40 weeks of total closure and 51 weeks of partial closure); the Plurinational State of Bolivia, with a total of 90 weeks (43 of them with a total closure of schools); Honduras, with 89 total weeks (but with the highest level of total closure, reaching 67 weeks); and El Salvador, with 88 weeks of closure of face-to-face classes (of which 46 were total closures).

Although most countries implemented strategies for educational continuity via distance learning, making the necessary means available and developing pedagogical innovations in record time, the impact of one or more years of non-classroom-based education has been devastating. In the world's most unequal region, this impact has hit the most vulnerable populations hardest and, as such, the pandemic implies a potential widening of pre-existing gaps in educational attainment. The effects on skills accumulation and learning processes of the entire student population will be seen in the short, medium and long terms, but the prolonged health and social crisis has also impacted a variety of aspects associated with the well-being and development of children and adolescents.

Figure 2
Latin America and the Caribbean (33 countries) and the world: total or partial school closures (primary and secondary levels) from February 2020 to March 2022
(In number of weeks)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [Online] https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/data.

On average, the probability of being in poverty or extreme poverty decreases over the life cycle in the countries of the region. In other words, since before the pandemic, children and adolescents in the region were overrepresented in poor households (ECLAC, 2021a). ECLAC estimates of child poverty in 2020 showed that child poverty would have affected 51.3% of the region's child population (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2020). Thus, the prolonged health, economic and social crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean and the increase in the percentage of households living in poverty, has a direct impact on the well-being of the child population, who already faced various difficulties in accessing health, education and other services related to their overall welfare. For example, the overcrowding of health services during this extended crisis period has had an impact on access to routine health checks for children, as well as on nutritional food monitoring and timely access to mandatory immunisation programmes, diagnostics and referrals (ECLAC/UNICEF/Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, 2020).

It is also estimated that the closure of schools, as a place of protection and detection of rights violations, may have increased the risks of exposure to situations of abuse and violence (ECLAC/UNICEF/Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, 2020). As a result, the impact on their mental health and socioemotional well-being is another area of risk and alert for educational recovery processes (Marinho and Castillo, 2022). The decrease in interpersonal contact, as well as the loss of their primary or secondary caregivers or close relatives, uncertainty and fear for such prolonged periods have undoubtedly affected the life trajectories of these generations of students (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2021).

During the most critical periods of confinement and school closures, most countries established distance learning measures. The use of digital media and the Internet became a favoured option to continue both educational and other everyday activities. However, in this process of transition to distance learning via digital media, significant challenges were faced, as identified from qualitative studies and conversations with students (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2021). The first challenge relates to the lack of and inequality in access to the Internet and technological devices (which is critical and will be discussed later in this document), but it is only the first step. Barriers to the digital transition are related not only to digital media access but also to the lack of digital skills and family support in the process. Second, this transition to distance learning has brought to light a set of social and emotional skills required to cope with it that many students did not have, such as time management, discipline and motivation, among others. Third, in this process of transition to distance learning, insufficient adaptation of teaching methods to the virtual environment was identified as an obstacle, as it is difficult to succeed in distance learning processes using the same teaching methods that were used in the face-to-face classroom setting (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2021).

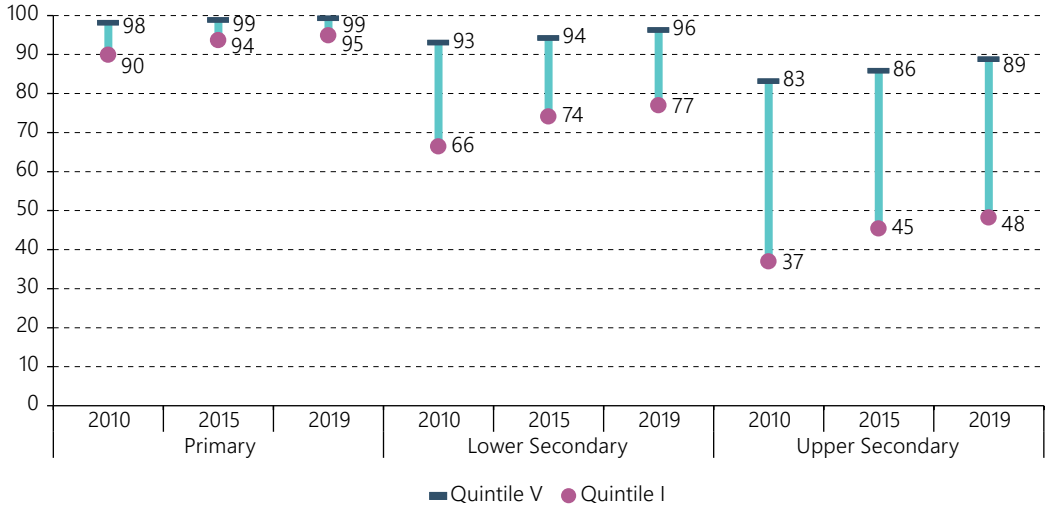
B. The intensity of the crisis has exposed issues with regard to the equality and quality of education systems

In recent decades prior to the pandemic, the region had shown significant progress in education, particularly in primary and secondary education. Over the last 20 years, the expansion of lower and upper secondary completion has outpaced the increase in coverage. This outcome is associated with the strengthening of mechanisms to improve educational trajectories, thus increasing the probability of completing the education level, as well as with the implementation of a series of policies to expand secondary education through alternative routes to mainstream education (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).

Primary education completion levels had reached near-universal levels in most countries in the region, and despite the much greater challenge at secondary level, completion levels at this level had increased significantly, especially among lower-income population groups, slowly narrowing the inequality gaps in completion (see figure 3). However, the same advances in coverage, access and progression at different education levels have led to stratification of learning and achievement within education systems. Moreover, a slowdown in the progress of education indicators in the countries of the region has been observed since 2015 (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).

Despite progress, inequalities remained widespread, particularly with regard to secondary completion: while 89% of students in the highest income quintile completed upper secondary education in 2019, fewer than half of students in the lowest income quintile did so (see figure 3). In addition to these gaps, there are those generated by differences based on ethnicity and race and related to the territory where students live, disability, as well as with their migrant and refugee status. These factors are all axes in the inequality matrix in the region whose dimensions combine and interconnect to create critical hurdles that hinder progress in key indicators of social inclusion and inequality reduction (ECLAC, 2019).

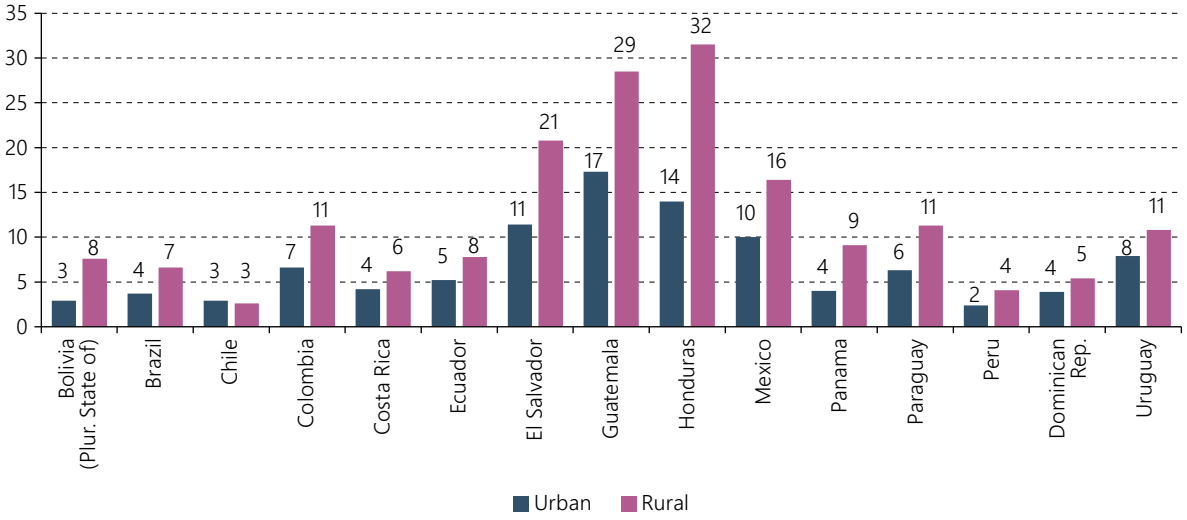
Figure 3
Latin America (18 countries[a]): primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education completion rates, by extreme income quintiles, 2010, 2015 and 2019
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
[a] Weighted average of Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

Thus, for example, it is apparent that in 2019 there were still differences in the proportion of adolescents aged 12 to 17 who did not attend school depending on the territory in which they lived. In all countries with data, there is evidence that more adolescents are out of the school system in rural areas than in urban areas (see figure 4). Additionally, despite the limited information collected in the countries by ethnicity and race, the statistics available for 2019 showed that the general trend in the countries of the region is that indigenous students complete lower secondary education at a lower rate than students of non-indigenous or non-African descent (except for Chile and Peru) (see table 1). In the case of the population of African descent, all countries with data for 2019 showed significant gaps to the detriment of this population group in lower secondary completion levels.

Figure 4
Latin America (15 countries): non-attendance rate (12–17 years), by urban/rural context, around 2019
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

Table 1
Latin America (9 countries): lower secondary education completion rate, by ethnicity and race, around 2019
(Percentages)

	Non-indigenous and non-African descent	Indigenous	African descent
Bolivia (Plur. State of)	92.8	88.8	...
Brazil[a]	92.6	82.5	85.0
Chile	96.7	97.2	...
Colombia	80.6	63.8	70.2
Ecuador[b]	92.6	86.7	86.3
Mexico	91.6	86.0	...
Panamá	90.8	67.9	86.9
Peru[c]	93.2	93.9	82.7
Uruguay	78.1	...	56.9

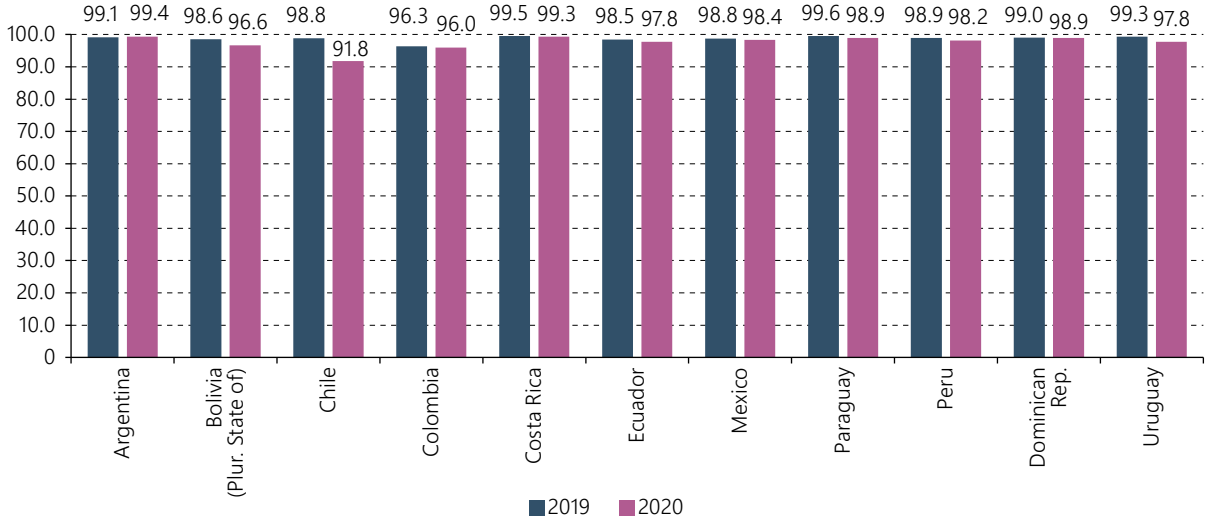
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
Note: ... No data availabe.
[a] Proxy data for estimates of the indigenous category in 2010, 2015 and 2019 due to sample size.
[b] Proxy data for estimates of the African descent category in 2020 due to sample size.
[c] Proxy data for estimates of the African descent category in 2015 due to sample size.

ECLAC contends that the completion of secondary education is a minimum threshold for individuals to actively participate in the increased productivity required for sustainable growth and to mitigate the intergenerational reproduction of inequality and exclusion. In recent years, compulsory lower secondary education has been extended in all Latin American countries (except for Nicaragua), and 13 of these countries have extended it to upper secondary education (except Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama). These efforts have undoubtedly contributed to the expansion of coverage and completion rates, but it has been a slow and incomplete process. This implies several challenges, which will be compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, there is the issue of fully expanding secondary education without leaving anyone behind, as stated in SDG 4, given that there are several countries in the region that are still far from achieving the agreed target 4.1 of "ensur[ing] that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes". On the other hand, it is necessary to address the significant inequalities that exist in educational trajectories through the educational cycle, which in turn generate major inequalities in completion levels. A final challenge is building an educational offer that guarantees social and educational inclusion for all, with adequate quality levels (Acosta, 2022).

The intensity and extent of the pandemic has revealed issues regarding the equality and quality of education systems that had plagued the region for years. Despite the great capacity for innovation demonstrated by education systems, the past couple years have also shown that distance learning has its limits, and that classroom-based learning is essential. It is difficult to predict how wide-ranging the effects of this prolonged crisis will be on educational attainment. Still, it is expected to affect educational trajectories in terms of progression levels, increase the risk of school dropout, widen gaps in learning outcomes and generate a profound deterioration in the socioemotional well-being of the educational community.

Pre-pandemic primary school attendance rates were close to 100% in most countries in the region. According to household measurements in 2020, the difference in the results of this indicator between 2019 and 2020 is relatively minor, with an average drop of less than 1%, which does not show statistically significant changes in student attendance in this educational cycle. The exception is Chile, for which the baseline data is from 2017, but where the attendance rate falls by more than 7 percentage points (see figure 5).

Figure 5
Latin America (11 countries): net attendance rate for primary education, 2019–2020[a]
(Percentages)

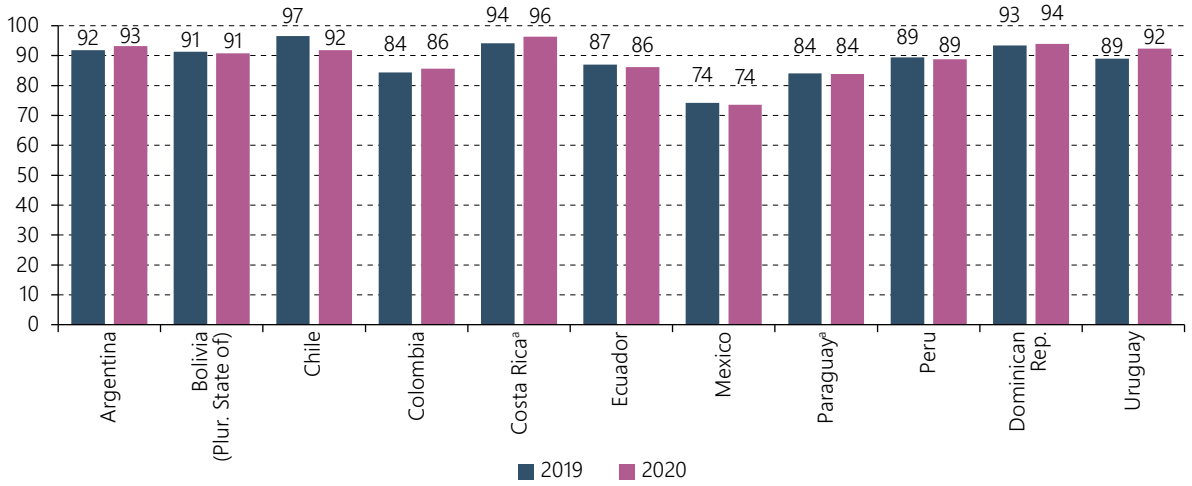


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
[a] All countries' surveys are for the years 2019 and 2020, except for Chile, for which the data is from 2017 and 2020, and Mexico, for which the data is from 2018 and 2020.

Despite the lack of sensitivity of this variable in household surveys (i.e., to the low observed impact of the pandemic), studies indicate that, although school attendance has not declined in primary education, the impacts of the pandemic will be particularly acute for this student segment because of the greater difficulty faced by younger children in maintaining educational processes remotely compared to adolescents and young people. The transition to distance and home-based educational processes requires caregivers and family members to provide greater support to facilitate learning processes, which widens the gaps according to socioeconomic status, given the material differences (study areas at home, access to the Internet and digital devices, among others), as well as the skills and time availability of caregivers. Because of this difficulty in continuing to learn basic cognitive skills over such a prolonged and critical period, it is estimated that in the 6–14-year-old age group, there will also be a greater probability of school dropouts, resulting in delays in learning processes that will be difficult to recover (World Bank, 2022).

On average, upper secondary attendance rates at the national level are also quite high (above 90%) and do not seem to vary significantly between 2019 and 2020. There are even several countries where the average attendance rate increased (see figure 6). One of the main reasons for dropping out of secondary education is related to the economic needs of the household and the student, which lead to young people of secondary school age and who belong to the most disadvantaged social strata having to quit school to find paid work to contribute income to their household or to take on unpaid caregiving and domestic work (which affects women to a greater extent). Given the considerable impact the confinement measures had on the labour market, especially in 2020, it is possible that in the short term, this factor may not have played a major role in hindering school attendance. However, the impoverishment of households in the region because of the pandemic is likely to affect the educational trajectory of adolescents and young people who will inevitably have to contribute financially to their households and enter the labour market prematurely, increasing the risk of dropping out of school and not completing this educational cycle.

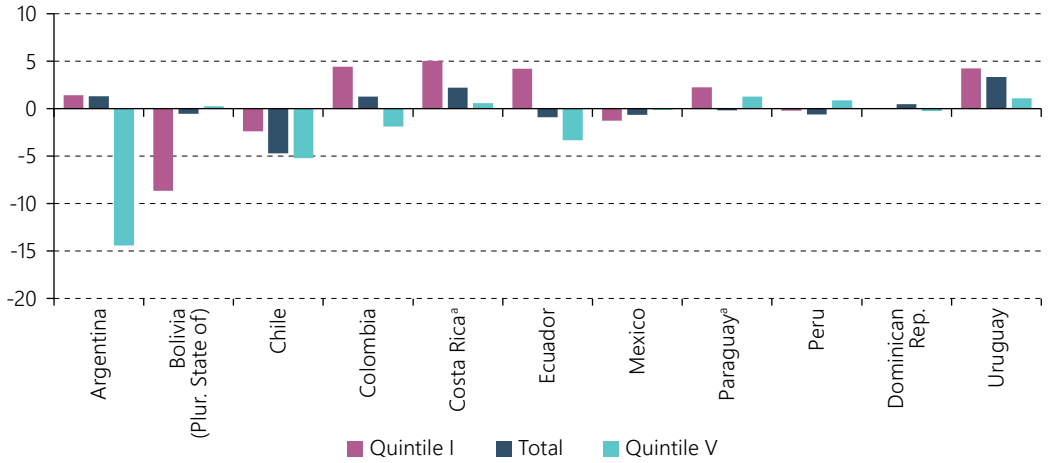
Figure 6
Latin America (11 countries): net attendance rate for upper secondary education, 2019–2020
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
[a] Proxy data for estimates for fifth quintile category (2019 and 2020) due to sample size.

When analysing the variation in the upper secondary attendance rate by extreme household income quintiles, it can be seen that in several countries it was the attendance of students in the highest income quintile that had the greatest negative impact. The figures for Argentina stand out, where the attendance rate fell very significantly (dropping by more than 14 percentage points in 2020), as do those for Chile, Ecuador and Colombia. In Chile, the attendance of lower-income students also declined, but to a lesser extent than for higher-income students (see figure 7). This trend reflects the limits of distance learning, particularly in terms of the difficulty of maintaining students' motivation for learning. Reluctance and demotivation were major issues for adolescents and young people during the confinement periods (Acosta, 2022). The only exception to this trend was the Plurinational State of Bolivia, where the most impacted students were those with the lowest incomes, which is probably associated with the major digital connectivity challenges in this country (see box 2).

Figure 7
Latin America (11 countries): difference in the net attendance rate for upper secondary education between 2020 and 2019, by extreme income quintiles
(Percentage points)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
[a] Proxy data for estimates for fifth quintile category (2019 and 2020) due to sample size.

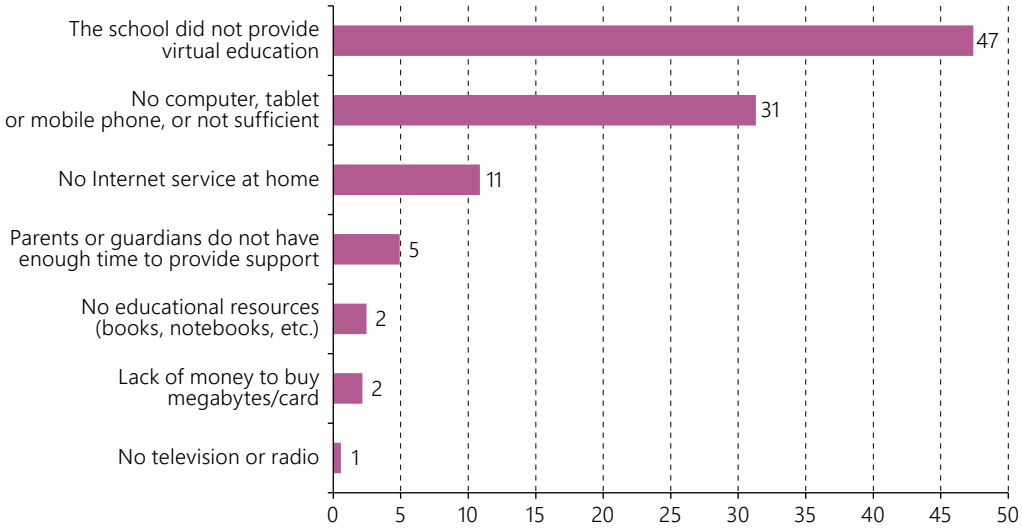
Box 2
Gaps in Internet access were a major obstacle to educational continuity: the case of the Plurinational State of Bolivia

Around 2019, 33% of children, adolescents and young people (aged 5 to 20) in the average of 13 Latin American countries with available data (Argentina, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay) lived in households without Internet access. In other words, one third of the households with student population were not prepared to continue schooling remotely via digital media. Access is also very unequal between countries in the region and according to socioeconomic status: on average, 53% of 5- to 20-year-olds in the lowest income quintile had access to the Internet at home, compared to 93% of those in quintile 5 with the highest incomes.

In the case of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, this figure came to 78.8% of students in the 5- to 20-year-old age group. In other words, most students did not have the minimum level required to continue their education in this way. With regard to the 5- to 20-year-old age group in the lowest-income households (first quintile), the percentage of households without an Internet connection amounted to 90% in 2019. This was also one of the countries with the longest disruption of face-to-face classes: by March 2022, it had reached a total of 90 weeks of partial or total closure (43 of them with a total closure of schools).

In its 2020 household survey, it was the only country in Latin America that asked about the reasons for not regularly attending an educational activity due to digital issues and those related to the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reason given by those who stopped attending their educational activities was that their educational institution did not provide online learning options (47%). The second most common reason was that people said that they did not have a computer, tablet or cellular phone or that the devices they had were not sufficient to enable them to continue their studies (30%).

Plurinational State of Bolivia: reasons for not attending educational activities, 12- to 17-year-old age group, 2020



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on household surveys from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

It is likely that the impacts of the lack of an Internet connection, which affect the lower-income population to a greater extent, are linked to the differentiated effect on school attendance which, unlike in the other countries in the region, fell by more than 8 percentage points for the population of students in the lowest income quintile and had no effect on the average population or on those with higher incomes (see figure 7).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Regional Broadband Observatory (ORBA) of ECLAC based on household surveys from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

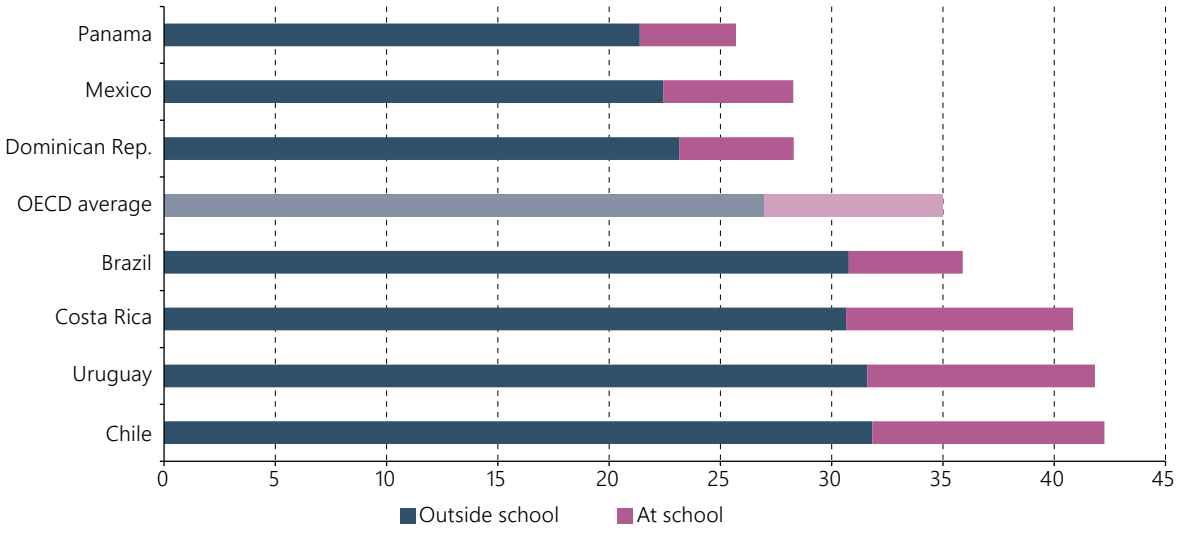
C. Students in the region did not have the same possibilities to continue their studies remotely

The closure of schools as a measure to prevent and control the spread of the COVID-19 virus led to the implementation of various remote education strategies to provide continuity in teaching and learning processes. In this context, unmet needs regarding Internet access and the possibilities of efficiently using new technologies became apparent, which further deepened the learning gaps that existed prior to the pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean.

1. Significant gaps in effective Internet access between and within the different countries of the region

Prior to the pandemic, adolescents in the region had significantly increased the time they spent online: data collected from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measurements reveal that the time 15-year-old students spent online increased by 66% between 2012 and 2018, reaching more than 35 hours per week (the OECD average) in Brazil, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile (OECD, 2021a) (see figure 8). Among the countries in the region that participated in both assessments, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay stand out: all of them experienced an increase of more than 80% in the time their adolescents spent online between the two years.

Figure 8
Latin America (7 countries) and OECD average: number of hours per week spent on the Internet, 15-year-olds, PISA 2018
(Percentages)



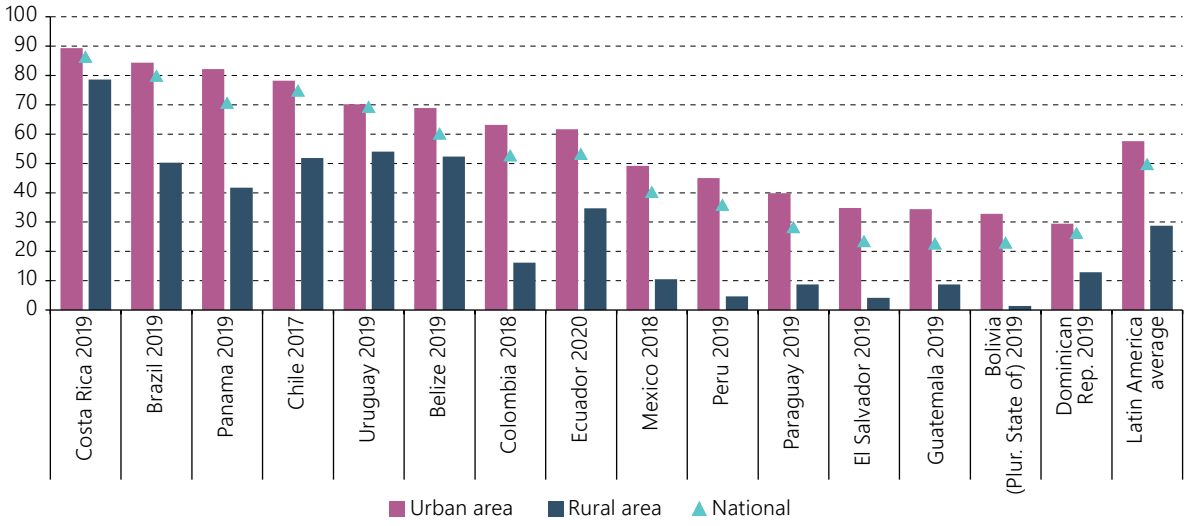
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.

The increase in hours spent online can be partly explained by the growing penetration of mobile broadband in recent decades. Indeed, in 2020, this was the main means of accessing the Internet in the region: 62% of the population were mobile Internet users, while only 14% had fixed access (ECLAC, 2021b). However, on average, the quality of household Internet connections in the region falls short of international standards: mobile broadband download speeds in Latin America and the Caribbean lag those in more advanced countries, limiting the type of web browsing that is possible. For example, while South Korea

has an average speed of 180 Mbps, speeds in the region are around only 25 Mbps (ECLAC, 2021b). Given that children and adolescents likely increased their time online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the type of connection that prevailed in the region was a first obstacle to educational continuity. In other words, while mobile broadband has enabled greater access to the Internet, this medium probably did not enable adequate browsing speeds to cope with the needs of remote education.

Latin America and the Caribbean show profound inequalities in household Internet access, which reflect the disparate contexts of the different countries and are structured around the social inequality matrix axes. Figure 9 shows the percentage of households with an Internet connection in different countries and territories. The figure highlights, on the one hand, the situation in Costa Rica, which has not only the highest average household connection rate (around 86%) but also the smallest territorial gap between urban and rural households (around ten percentage points). At the other extreme in terms of the average percentage of connected households is the Dominican Republic, where 26% of households had an Internet connection prior to the pandemic, and the Plurinational State of Bolivia, where less than 2% of rural households were connected (see box 2). Although rural households in all the countries analysed in figure 9 have lower Internet connection levels than urban households, the connection levels of rural households in Peru, Paraguay, El Salvador and Guatemala (in addition to the Plurinational State of Bolivia) are particularly poor. In all of them, less than 10% of rural households had an Internet connection prior to the pandemic.

Figure 9
Latin America and the Caribbean (15 countries): households with and without Internet access by geographical area, latest available year
(Percentages of total households in each area)

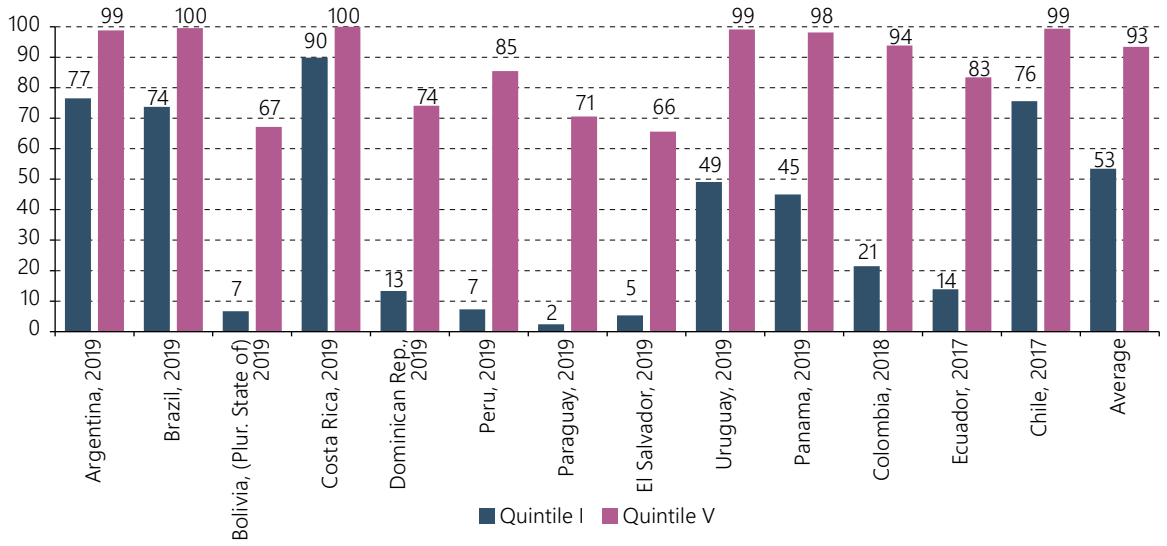


Source: Regional Broadband Observatory (ORBA) of ECLAC, based on household surveys from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
Note: Simple average. Access is not limited to computers, but can also include cellular phone, gaming machine, digital TV, etc.

In addition to territorial gaps, figure 10 shows that differences in Internet access by income level were also quite pronounced prior to the pandemic. In fact, when comparing the levels of Internet access of children and adolescents between ages 5 and 20 by household independent income quintile on average, 53% of those living in households belonging to the first quintile have access, while this percentage rises to 93% in households belonging to the highest income quintile. The difference favouring higher-income

households is present in all 13 countries for which household survey data is available, with the socioeconomic gap being most marked in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In these three countries, a total of 7.4 million children and adolescents in the lowest income quintile did not have an Internet connection at home in 2019, which undoubtedly limited the possibilities of continuing their studies remotely.

Figure 10
Latin America (13 countries): population aged 5 to 20 living in households with Internet access in the first and fifth independent income quintiles, latest year available[a]
(Percentages)



Source: Regional Broadband Observatory (ORBA) of ECLAC, based on household surveys from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
[a] Weighted average.

Household income level is associated not only with the quality of the Internet connection (or the absence/presence of such a connection) but also with the presence or absence of restrictions on the number of devices that would allow such a connection for all household members. Effective connectivity is understood as the conjunction of two situations: first, having access to broadband and fixed services and second, having access to devices, whether a smartphone, computer, or tablet. On average, lower-income households in the region have four times the average number of children as in higher-income households, which implies that lower-income households require more devices and assume a higher cost relative to their income to achieve effective connectivity for each of their members (which can represent up to 33% of the average income of households in the poorest quintiles) (ECLAC, 2021b). Regarding the type of device, the Kids Online survey (carried out in Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay among children and adolescents aged 9 to 17) shows that connecting to the Internet through a mobile device was the predominant modality among children and adolescents in the region prior to the pandemic, with such devices being the least conducive to developing digital skills and ensuring effective participation in the digital environment (Trucco and Palma, 2020).[1]

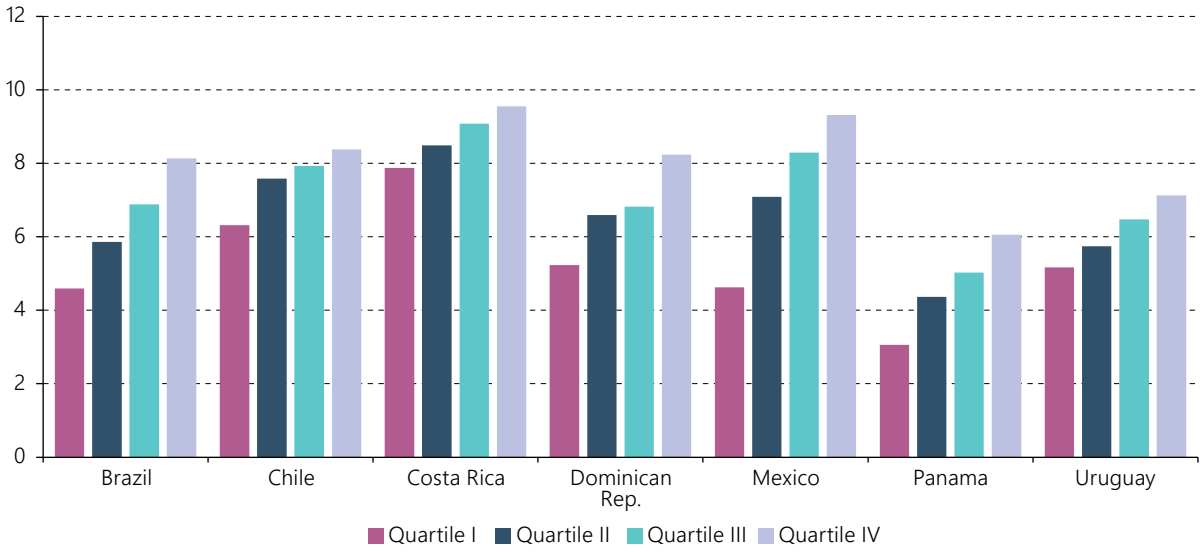
[1] The barriers associated with using a mobile device to develop digital skills and participate effectively in the digital environment are exacerbated if the device does not offer the possibility of ubiquitous access —i.e., Internet access in different locations— while the limitations of cellular phone use are compounded by the disadvantages associated with not having mobility of use and features.

2. Unequal distribution of digital skills among students undermined their effective use of technologies during the pandemic

In addition to effective Internet connectivity, the unequal distribution of digital skills in the population was also a contributing factor to deepening inequalities in the implementation of remote education. These skills help users benefit from opportunities available through the Internet while also reducing risks associated with its use. They include cognitive skills related to digital literacy, such as the ability to collaborate online, solve technical problems and create and publish content online; social skills, such as self-regulation and the ability to behave in socially appropriate ways online; and even physical skills, such as those related to the motor skills required to use digital devices. The set of digital skills relevant in each context and life cycle stage, as well as the relative importance of each of them, is not static and reflects the speed of technological change that characterises modern societies (ECLAC/OEI, 2020).

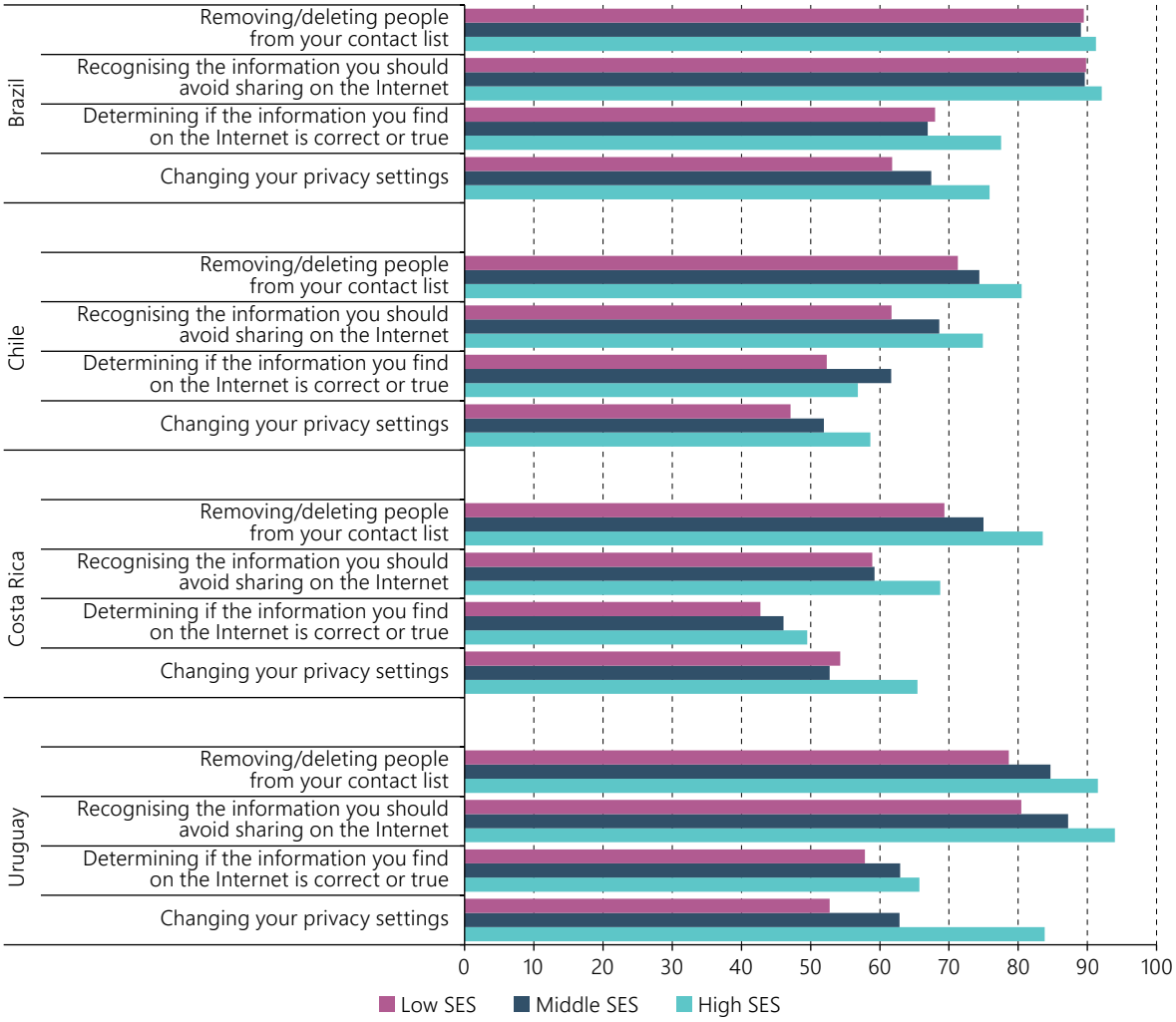
Prior to the pandemic, digital skills were unevenly distributed across and within countries in the region, with the socioeconomic status being an important explanatory factor behind these differences. For example, the PISA 2018 measurement asks about students' perceptions of their self-efficacy in using digital media. The assessment's results not only show significant heterogeneity across the countries that participated in the study but also that the higher the socioeconomic and cultural status of students, the higher their perceived self-efficacy (see figure 11). Similarly, the Kids Online survey also shows the region's heterogeneity in terms of children's digital skills and finds a positive relationship between students' socioeconomic status and their ability to limit risky online attitudes and distinguish between true and unreliable information (see figure 12).

Figure 11
Latin America (7 countries): index of perceived self-efficacy with digital media[a] by socioeconomic and cultural status, 2018
(Average index value)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.
[a] The index is individual and cumulative and ranges from 0 to 15. It is based on the PISA 2018 questions that ask about young people's comfort in navigating effectively in the digital world. The higher the index value, the higher the student's perceived efficacy, with zero being if the student does not feel comfortable with his or her digital skills in each of the assessed domains, and 15 if the student feels comfortable with his or her digital skills in all domains.

Figure 12
Latin America (4 countries): level of digital coping skills of children and adolescents using the Internet, by socioeconomic status
(Percentages)



Source: D. Trucco and A. Palma (eds.), "Infancia y Adolescencia en la era digital: un informe comparativo de los estudios de Kids Online del Brasil, Chile, Costa Rica y el Uruguay", Project Documents (LC/TS.2020/18/REV.1), 202. Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
[a] The indicator corresponds to the percentage of children and adolescents who report being somewhat or fully able to do these types of privacy-related activities when using digital devices and the Internet.

Overall, the data show considerable inequality in students' access to an effective Internet connection during the pandemic, as well as the presence of major skills gaps within educational communities. These inequalities meant that not all students were able to continue their learning processes in the same way during confinement periods. They also contributed to the unequal impact of distance learning on children and adolescents in the region to the detriment of those who had fewer material and non-material resources to access and benefit from opportunities in the digital world.

The transition to distance education was unexpected, abrupt and complex not only because of connectivity issues but also because of the lack of preparedness of the educational community at large. On the one hand, in the years prior to the pandemic, some international studies already showed the demand from teachers for more training in the digital sphere (ECLAC, 2021a). This lack

of preparedness to provide digital media training was a pre-crisis deficit. Thus, based on qualitative studies carried out with adolescents and young people enrolled in school during the crisis, the perception emerges of an insufficient adaptation of teaching methods to the virtual environment. Methods favoured study guides because they could be easily shared via WhatsApp messages (the most widespread means of digital communication in the region's countries). Undoubtedly, there were teachers who innovated and adapted their teaching methods to the digital format, executing projects that required filming, editing and even creating content on social media; however, these cases do not represent the experience of most students (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2021). What can be gleaned from students' accounts during periods of confinement and the suspension of face-to-face classes is that the institutions of the education system were not sufficiently prepared to deal with the shift to virtual or hybrid education (Acosta, 2022). The result was a widening of the inequality gaps that structure Latin American societies: the greater the availability of resources and capabilities, the better the response to the change process (Acosta, 2022).

The experiences produced by the pandemic crisis demonstrated the limits of schooling, especially in the sectors where material conditions are more precarious. However, these experiences also highlighted the importance of support figures (teachers, family and caregivers) and their necessary readjustments to changing scenarios. For example, never in the global history of the last century has education from pre-primary to upper secondary, and even tertiary, been provided at home (outside schools/educational establishments). This was not something we had imagined possible, and today we see that synchronous and asynchronous learning can be combined and hybrid teaching methods can be used: these are leaps that make it more difficult to go backwards and that force education systems to be restructured in a way that makes them more resilient and inclusive (ECLAC, 2022b; Acosta, 2022).

D. Innovations for educational continuity emerged and the current challenge is the transformation of education and learning recovery with face-to-face classes

1. Countries used digital and analogue media to maintain educational continuity during confinement periods

Throughout 2020, school closures forced countries in the region to unexpectedly implement various distance learning modalities as an urgent response to the crisis. Although distance learning is far from being a novel educational format, and many countries had digital platforms, programmes to provide technology to students and teachers, and even educational practices implemented through radio and television, most countries were in suboptimal conditions to tackle this unexpected transition. However, some countries or communities were more prepared to implement distance learning as part of ongoing strategies (see box 3 for an example of one subnational experience). For example, Mexico —the second largest education system in Latin America— has a long tradition of distance learning through its Telesecundaria system (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). Created in 1968, Telesecundaria is an alternative learning modality for rural and geographically inaccessible communities throughout the country (Acosta, 2022). Telesecundaria reached more than 1,300,000 students in 2018, equivalent to more than 20% of the student body at the secondary level in Mexico (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). During the pandemic, "Aprende en Casa" [Learning at Home][2] was the national programme for pedagogical continuity, implemented within the Telesecundaria system and complemented by radio broadcasts and a virtual component for the evaluation of the content taught (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). "Aprende en Casa" was developed by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) of

[2] See [online] https://aprendeencasa.sep.gob.mx/.

the Mexican federal government and covered the preschool, primary and secondary levels, reaching more than 25 million students (Ripani and Zucchetti, 2020). In conclusion, unlike the strategies adopted by other countries, Mexico, through "Aprende en Casa", sought to ensure pedagogical continuity by broadcasting content on television, complemented by an online broadcast via YouTube (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022).

Box 3
Bogotá's "Aprende en Casa" programme

Bogotá is the second largest education subsystem in Colombia, with more than 740,000 students. In Bogotá, 87.8% of students belong to vulnerable groups, while 5.6% are refugees from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and more than 8% have been victims of armed conflict in their own country (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). Following the school closures in March 2020, the Municipality of Bogotá decided to implement the "Aprende en Casa" [Learning at Home] programme, with five central focus areas:

(i) A web portal with teaching resources, webinars and virtual libraries.

(ii) Nationally broadcast television and radio programmes for students.

(iii) Distribution of a school kit consisting of textbooks, games and other activities for families without an Internet connection.

(iv) A feeding programme with meals delivered to each household.

(v) Technical and learning help desks to provide support to the community in the event of difficulties accessing technology or distributed materials.

The modification of pre-existing programmes characterised the local initiative, as in the case of school meals distributed to households, while also relying on national resources, such as the Ministry of National Education's "RedAcadémica" [Academic Network] portal or "Colombia Aprende" [Colombia Learns]. As part of the project, the Municipality of Bogotá partnered with the company Claro to provide mobile data access to more than 50,000 households, complemented by content broadcast on radio and television. Finally, "Aprende en Casa" reviewed the curricular content to give teachers a flexible offer so that they could adjust their teaching processes according to student needs and the challenges resulting from the virtual modality (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers (2022) and the Government of Bogotá (2022).

Meanwhile, Peru implemented the "Aprendo en Casa" [I Learn at Home] programme,[3] designed by the Ministry of Education when schools were closed in 2020. "Aprendo en Casa" was developed for four modes of transmission: television, Internet, radio and printed material. The programme's different modalities reflect the disparity of access to technology in Peru, where approximately 84% of households have access to television and 82% to radio, while only 24% have an Internet connection (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). This initiative involved the creation of a new web portal to house the materials and resources developed along with the adaptation by the Ministry of Education of the curricular content to the audio-visual format; new teaching materials were also developed. Specific platforms were also created for content dissemination in conjunction with the country's national television channels, radio stations and private channels that broadcast the content for the secondary level, and applications and web pages were developed to provide access to the content. Other aspects of the "Aprendo en Casa" programme include teacher training through the PeruEduca portal and the development of a web platform with asynchronous content, digital books and teaching materials, and access to more than 60 applications related to communication, classroom management and academic content for teachers and students (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022).

[3] More information [online] https://aprendoencasa.pe/.

Uruguay is another case in point for its response to the pandemic, led by the "Ceibal en casa" [Ceibal at home] plan. Since 2007, the Plan Ceibal (National Digital Education Plan —Ceibal stands for "Basic IT Educative Connectivity for Online Learning" in Spanish) has been a success story in implementing educational policies for access to information and communication technologies combined with distance learning. Through the Plan Ceibal,[4] every student and teacher at the primary and lower secondary levels (CINE 1 and 2) has been given a computer, and public schools have been provided with Internet and a wide range of pedagogical resources such as didactic material for teaching/learning process (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). The "Ceibal en casa" plan entailed transitioning from a complementary modality to classroom-based learning to fully remote education through the devices, platforms and resources provided through the plan. This transformation included both technical and pedagogical aspects, such as creating synchronous and asynchronous learning modalities, teacher training in the use of the new functionalities, a virtual library of more than 7,000 books and virtual platforms for learning mathematics.

The "Ceibal en casa" plan expanded the coverage of students and teachers able to access the platform prior to the pandemic, from 42% in May 2019 to 85% in May 2020 according to the organisation's data (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022). Finally, data collected on the implementation of the "Ceibal en casa" plan indicate a high degree of teacher satisfaction with the platform's functionality, as well as a very high level of usage (92%), while 93% of teachers participating in the survey reported using it for assignments and assessments, 87% for giving feedback and 59% for videoconferencing with other teachers (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022, p. 364).

According to a study conducted by ECLAC in 2020 in 10 Caribbean countries (Parker and Alfaro, 2021), the countries reported implementing a wide range of distance learning strategies, particularly digital ones. The most used strategy was synchronous online classes and online delivery of learning materials and assignments to students, which was reported by 9 out of 10 ministries of education responding to the questionnaire,[5] followed by direct delivery of learning materials to students, used in 8 out of 10 countries. Online platforms were also used to deliver pre-recorded video or audio lessons (in seven countries). According to the results of this research, the decision by schools regarding which distance education strategies to use considered the level of Internet access and digital devices in their students' homes. Schools with a lower proportion of students with digital access chose physical delivery of learning materials as their primary strategy, which was usually complemented by asynchronous distance learning methods, such as the use of WhatsApp and phone calls (Parker and Alfaro, 2021).

In addition, the Caribbean countries took measures to mitigate the impacts of the confinement and school closures on students' learning processes. Thus, the most frequent mitigation measure to support distance learning was the distribution of digital devices, implemented by 9 of the 10 countries. However, connectivity issues at home, another key area to support remote online learning, were not addressed. Several countries also recognised the increased risk of domestic violence that would affect children and adolescents because of confinement measures and acted accordingly to detect it.

[4] See [online] https://www.ceibal.edu.uy/es.

[5] Anguilla, Belize, Grenada, Guyana, Martinique, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Turks and Caicos Islands.

2. The return to face-to-face classes during an ongoing pandemic requires major adaptations of the education system

The year 2021 was characterised by a return to classroom-based learning and was marked by temporary closures due to outbreaks, vaccination campaigns and new protocols for social distancing and caregiving. Despite vaccination being a main tool for controlling the health crisis, the progress made in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021 was slow and uneven, given the concentration of doses in developed countries. According to figures from the 2021 edition of the Social Panorama (ECLAC, 2022b), by 31 December 2021, only 59.4% of the population in this region had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. In other words, by the end of 2021, 28 of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean had not yet met the WHO target of getting 70% of the population fully vaccinated. The full or partial reopening of schools involved a series of important decisions by government authorities on many variables: the epidemiological situation, vaccination levels and infrastructure conditions, among others.

The key aspects related to the measures adopted by education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed below, based on the report by UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF (2022), which uses the information gathered from the global survey conducted by the aforementioned organisations together with the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) —the "Survey of National Education Responses to COVID-19— and the findings of three other reports by the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo and Reimers, 2022; Tejada and others, 2022; Reimers and Opertti, 2021). The UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF (2022) document includes an analysis of actions reported by countries on school reopening, measures taken to address learning gaps, disengaged students and the most vulnerable groups, teacher policies and education financing.

According to this report (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022), decisions on school reopening in the countries of the region fell mainly to the central government level (93%) compared to the provincial or state (15%) or local levels (4%). However, when disaggregating the information collected by the survey according to the size of the education systems, those with more than 2.5 million students,[6] such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico, also included subnational levels in 20% of the cases for decision-making (see box 4). The size of the education systems also appears to be related to the length of time schools were totally closed, with the larger the size, the more days schools were totally closed.

Box 4
Community learning centres in Sinaloa, Mexico

In Latin America, most countries are characterised by decentralised governance of their education systems, leading to greater diversity in policy experiences when analysing subnational levels (Rivas and others, 2020). In Sinaloa, Mexico, community learning centres (CLCs) have been especially helpful in bringing students back into classrooms. As mandated by the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education, from December 2020, schools could voluntarily return to face-to-face classes under the CLC modality, with only nine students for two hours per day to safeguard health measures while promoting school re-engagement (Reimers and Opertti, 2021). Between April and May 2021, 900 CLCs operated in Sinaloa, supporting almost 26,000 students (Reimers and Opertti, 2021, p. 108). Sinaloa's CLCs are an example of decentralised education governance since, in addition to being subject to federal regulation, each community, brought together through a School Technical Council comprising teachers, principals and families, had to decide on their implementation, shifting the level of decision-making to the school or community level. However, one limitation of this approach was that only 15% of schools in Sinaloa decided to reopen under the CLC modality (Reimers and Opertti, 2021).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Reimers and Opertti (2021).

[6] Three large systems did not participate in the survey: Argentina, Peru and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

All countries in the region adopted hygiene protocols for the full or partial reopening of their education systems, such as hand washing, mandatory use of face masks, improved ventilation or reduced class sizes where possible. When faced with positive or suspected cases of COVID-19, 92% of countries took some form of isolation measure (of the individual case or the entire class, depending on the situation), and 83% included temperature checks as a standard procedure (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). However, only 13% of countries tested for COVID-19 in schools (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Another important set of measures related to the pandemic and the partial or total closure of schools was the reduction of curricular content. At the primary and secondary levels, 44% of countries prioritised curricular areas, with reading, writing and literature, on the one side, and mathematics, on the other, receiving the most attention (93% and 91%, respectively, for the primary and lower secondary levels in both cases), to the detriment of other areas (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

School education (from pre-primary to upper secondary) is a central pillar for the training and protection of children and adolescents and a space where other rights are guaranteed in addition to education itself, including food, detection and protection from rights violations such as being victims of violence, child labour or exploitation (ECLAC, 2021c). School feeding programmes are key for families, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. In the first round of the survey conducted with regard to countries' responses to the pandemic in 2020, 65% of countries reported delivering school meals/food to families (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021a). In the third edition of the same survey conducted in 2021, 36% of countries reported having made adjustments to their school feeding programmes at the primary level, and 27% at the lower and upper secondary levels (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

The gaps in learning outcomes between and within countries in the region, particularly marked by socioeconomic stratum, area of residence, gender, ethnicity, race and disability status (among other structural axes of the region's inequality matrix), were a deficit the region was already facing prior to the pandemic (for more details, see chapter II). Many measures that countries adopted for health control during the reopening processes, such as decreasing the number of students per classroom or alternating classroom attendance, coupled with prolonged periods of suspended face-to-face classes, may have had a negative impact and widened the gaps. When schools were reopened and face-to-face classes resumed, more than one-third of countries reported adopting alternating attendance (reaching 50% for upper secondary), and one-third also decided that the return to schools should be gradual and progressive (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Another measure with a potential impact on the gaps has been reducing or eliminating curricular activities, which were adopted by 50% of countries in the region for the primary and lower secondary levels, and 55% of countries for the upper secondary level (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

Concerning the possible increase in learning gaps, it is essential to understand the impact that school closures and remote education may have had on learning processes. However, on average, only 36% of the countries implemented some kind of assessment of the learning gaps that may have developed in this period in Latin American countries. Meanwhile, in the Caribbean countries assessments were carried out in more countries and in a coordinated manner. Through CARICOM and the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), assessments were organised to evaluate learning in 54% of cases for the primary level and 48% for the secondary level (lower and upper) (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). However, only one third of the countries implemented remedial measures to close learning gaps targeting students who did not access distance learning. When asked what measures countries took to plan school time for learning recovery, some countries did so during school holidays (18% for primary, 14% for lower secondary and 18% for upper secondary); others did so after school hours (18% for primary, 18% for lower secondary and 23% for upper secondary); and only 5% of countries reported doing so during weekends for upper secondary (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

A final aspect of the survey that stands out regarding addressing learning loss relates to the steps countries took to assess the state of their education systems and evaluate policies implemented during the first year of the pandemic. At the time of the survey, 42% of the countries conducted formative classroom assessments, while 54% had conducted or planned to conduct standardised assessments at the national or subnational level. It is worth noting that many of these assessments involve modifications to traditional tools, as 2021 was considered the key year for diagnostics and readjustment of the assessments suspended in 2020 (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Additionally, when countries were asked about assessments of the effectiveness of the measures implemented during the pandemic to ensure learning continuity, more than half did not carry out any assessment, 42% assessed virtual platforms and 19% sought to learn about the use of television.

The UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF report (2022) also summarises the main actions that countries took to address the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, the vast majority of whom were unable to access learning continuity via digital means when face-to-face classes were suspended. Such actions include support for children with disabilities through additional financial support (31% of Latin American and Caribbean countries), subsidised provision of devices (27% of countries), the design of adapted materials (62% of countries) or the creation of flexible learning platforms (38% of countries) (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). However, most countries did not take specific measures to support other groups exposed to vulnerable situations, such as refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples or girls.

In terms of actions taken to prevent the most disadvantaged students from dropping out after schools reopened, countries indicated that specific mechanisms were implemented to track them: 42% for students with disabilities, 33% for students based on ethnicity and minority language speakers, 29% for refugees, migrants and displaced persons, 25% for girls and 42% for other at-risk populations (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

The two surveys conducted in the countries in 2020 highlighted the efforts made by teachers and school leaders to ensure learning continuity for students (UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank, 2020). The third edition of the study, conducted in 2021, made it possible to analyse the challenges of 2020 as well as to identify new trends during schools' reopening. The survey data show strong efforts to support teachers by countries in the region in the second year of the pandemic. This is reflected in the fact that in 68% of countries, at least 75% of teachers received training in teaching methods, and 80% of countries provided learning support materials to more than 75% of their teachers (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Distance learning instruction (96%) and professional, psychosocial and emotional support (85%) stand out regarding the types of support provided. However, in less than half of the cases, guidelines or support to reduce the additional workload and hours resulting from the transition to hybrid distance learning were provided (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).

Regarding the additional teaching workload due to the pandemic, another highlight from this third round of the survey was the addition of new teaching staff as a mitigation measure; this occurred in 42% of countries, while a further 26% planned to add teachers in the current year (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). However, despite the hiring of new teaching and non-teaching staff, in 92% of countries there was no improvement in teachers' salaries and benefits (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Teachers were also among the priority groups for vaccination in 26 of the region's countries, a key element in the reopening processes. A final important element is using national surveys of teachers to gain insight into their perceptions of the situation caused by the pandemic. Although this has not been a widespread measure among countries (as was the case in Argentina and Peru), civil society organisations or other multinational bodies also participated in implementing such surveys.

Decision-making to address the COVID-19 pandemic was characterised not only by the need for emergency responses but also by uncertainty of those responses. One element that stands out from the three rounds of the survey is the lack of readily available information on managing education systems at

the national and subnational levels (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). This lack of information impacts the decisions' effectiveness and, especially, the most vulnerable population groups, who have been the least likely to return after schools reopened. In this regard, the standardised assessments planned for 2021 and 2022 will be key to understanding the state of education systems and should be complemented by other regional or international assessments.

The experience of the last two years shows that distance learning programmes —whatever their modality (online, radio or television)— have their limits and have exacerbated the structural education disparities that already existed in the region prior to the pandemic, increasing the risks of students dropping out of school and gaps in learning and skill building. The return to classroom-based learning is very important, especially for the most disadvantaged groups. Schools fulfil a protective and monitoring role that goes far beyond academic purposes, from socialisation to violence prevention and health, among others. Schools also facilitate the possibility of returning to the labour market, especially for women (ECLAC, 2022b and 2021c). Face-to-face classes must be resumed in a way that is safe and in coordination with the health sector to protect students and school staff.

As a basic condition for educational recovery, educational continuity and return strategies must prioritise the socioemotional well-being of the entire school community —not only of students but also of teachers who have been overworked. As discussed in this section, it is critical at this stage to implement or reimplement diagnostic assessment processes to have the necessary information to prioritise essential learning by educational cycle.

II. The pandemic threatens to deepen the learning crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean

Uncertainty about the present and the future is high in the region and the world. Latin America and the Caribbean face a global scenario marked by constant economic, social, environmental and political changes that profoundly affect the educational and professional trajectories of the new generations. This is a complex and challenging context that has also suffered the unexpected and dramatic impact of the prolonged health crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, where the region has been among the most vulnerable in the world (ECLAC, 2022b). Part of the uncertainty that characterises the contemporary world is also a consequence of the impact of the digital revolution and the fourth industrial revolution, both of unprecedented speed and magnitude, which are driving major changes in terms of the skills and abilities that education systems must teach (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). All these changes do not affect the entire population in the same way, as the social inequality matrix in the region makes certain groups of the population especially vulnerable in the face of the current crisis.

A. Latin America and the Caribbean were already experiencing a learning crisis prior to the pandemic

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the pandemic exposed the equality and quality deficits that characterised education systems in the region. According to the Incheon Declaration and the Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4, "[q]uality education fosters creativity and knowledge and ensures the acquisition of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy as well as analytical, problem solving and other high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills. It also develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions and respond to local and global challenges through education for sustainable development (ESD) and global citizenship education (GCED)" (UNESCO and others, 2015, p. 8). Based on this definition, the concept of quality education not only refers to learning knowledge and developing cognitive skills, which are very important for a fulfilling life, but also recognises the holistic nature of education and its relevance for sustainable social and economic development, as well as for building strong and inclusive democracies.

ECLAC and OEI (2020) have pointed out the central importance of skills in this dynamic and highly uncertain global scenario. The concept of skills is related to the holistic development of people and to the knowledge aimed at applying and integrating different types of learnings, which is essential for the formation of new generations. Within the scope of these challenges, the study conducted by ECLAC and OEI analysed the set of skills and abilities that have been proposed by different international organisations and the academic world, in contrast with the demands identified by the business and productive sectors. Accordingly, the study outlines the type of skills that need to be enhanced, linked to different key abilities (see table 2).

Table 2
Categories of twenty-first-century skills and abilities

Skills	Abilities
Cognitive	Basic (literacy and numeracy)
	Learning (complex)
	Technology and computational thinking
	Information and data management
Socioemotional	Communication
	Collaboration
	Autonomy
Physical	Motor skills

Source: Prepared by the authors based on ECLAC/OEI (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/ Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture) (2020), "Educación, juventud y trabajo: habilidades y competencias necesarias en un contexto cambiante", Project Documents (LC/TS.2020/116), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

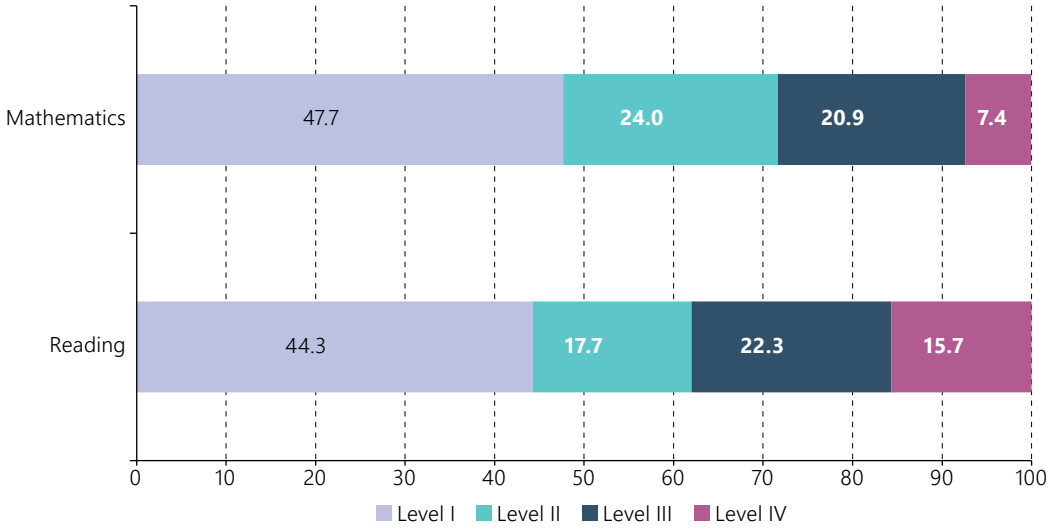
The first set of skills presented in the table are cognitive skills, which are understood as how and what type of learning takes place. They consist of basic skills (related to literacy and numeracy); higher-order complex learning skills, such as critical thinking or problem solving; technology integration skills/computational thinking (which goes beyond basic, operational digital literacy); and information and data management skills (searching, selecting, synthesising and validating information). The second set of skills are socioemotional skills, which refer to how to act, interact, work and adapt to the world and comprise the skills of communication, collaboration and autonomy. Finally, physical skills are understood as motor skills, which range from everyday abilities (dressing, moving and eating, among others) to those associated with sports, arts and music, and even more operational digital skills. This categorisation of skills and abilities will be used to organise the analysis of learning in this chapter.

1. Major deficiencies in cognitive skills development that are exacerbated throughout the educational cycle

The results of various standardised assessments conducted prior to the pandemic paint an extremely worrying picture for Latin America and the Caribbean in terms of cognitive skills development. Specifically, the data show that during their school years, children, adolescents and young people in the region were not acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to become accomplished and productive citizens. In other words, prior to the pandemic, education in the region had been experiencing a profound learning crisis that now threatens to become worse given the impact of the pandemic. More than ever, urgent and sound action is needed to achieve the SDG 4 commitments by 2030 and leave no one behind (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

The Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study 2019 (ERCE 2019) measured learning outcomes in mathematics, language and science for primary school students in grades 3 and 6 in 16 Latin American countries. The results show that, at the regional level, only slightly more than half of grade 3 students achieve a minimum proficiency level (MPL)[7] in both mathematics and reading (52.3% and 55.7%, respectively), while in grade 6, this proportion is even lower: 17.4% in mathematics, 31.2% in reading and 20.7% in science (see figures 13 and 14, where level II corresponds to the MPL in grade 3 and level III in grade 6). Moreover, when comparing these results with those obtained in 2013 (in the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, TERCE 2013), no significant progress can be seen in most of the countries that participated in both studies. In other words, the ERCE and TERCE results show that, prior to the pandemic, the region's education systems did not show significant improvements in their primary education achievement levels; on the contrary, learning was stagnating at levels well below the education targets set for 2030 (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

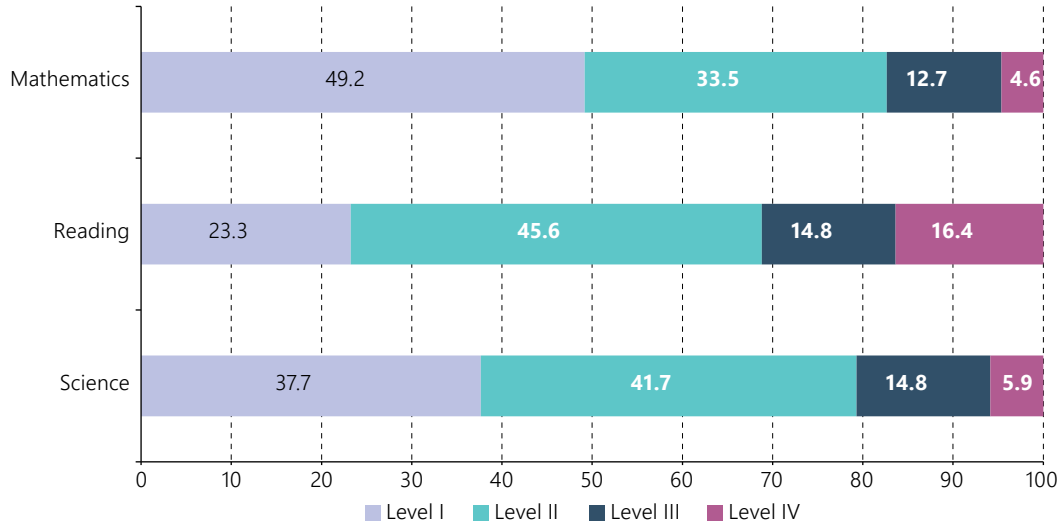
Figure 13
Latin America (16 countries): regional average[a] of grade 3 student achievement levels in ERCE 2019
(Percentages)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ERCE 2019 data.
[a] Simple average of the 16 Latin American countries that participated in ERCE 2019: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay.

[7] The minimum proficiency level refers to the basic level of knowledge in an area. According to UNESCO-OREALC (2021b), within the framework of SDG 4 monitoring for Latin America and the Caribbean, the MPL is considered from Level II in grade 3 reading and mathematics tests, and from Level III in grade 6 reading, mathematics, and science tests. In the third grade: achieving the MPL in reading involves being able to make basic inferences, locate literal or paraphrased information and recognise the structure of a text; in the mathematics test, grade 3 students who show an MPL can work with natural numbers up to 9,999, complete number patterns and read the information on simple graphs. In the sixth grade: achieving the MPL in reading means that the student shows a more elaborate capacity for inference, based on specific ideas and a comprehensive understanding of the text, as well as being able to interpret figurative language; in the mathematics test, grade 6 students who achieve the MPL must demonstrate the ability to interpret information to solve operations, work with fractions and simple decimal numbers and solve complex calculation problems related to areas and perimeters of geometric figures, among others. Finally, for sixth-grade science, the MPL requires recognising relationships between systems and their specific functions, identify natural cycle processes, and distinguish scientific research questions, among other elements.

Figure 14
Latin America (16 countries): regional average[a] of grade 6 student achievement levels in ERCE 2019
(Percentages)



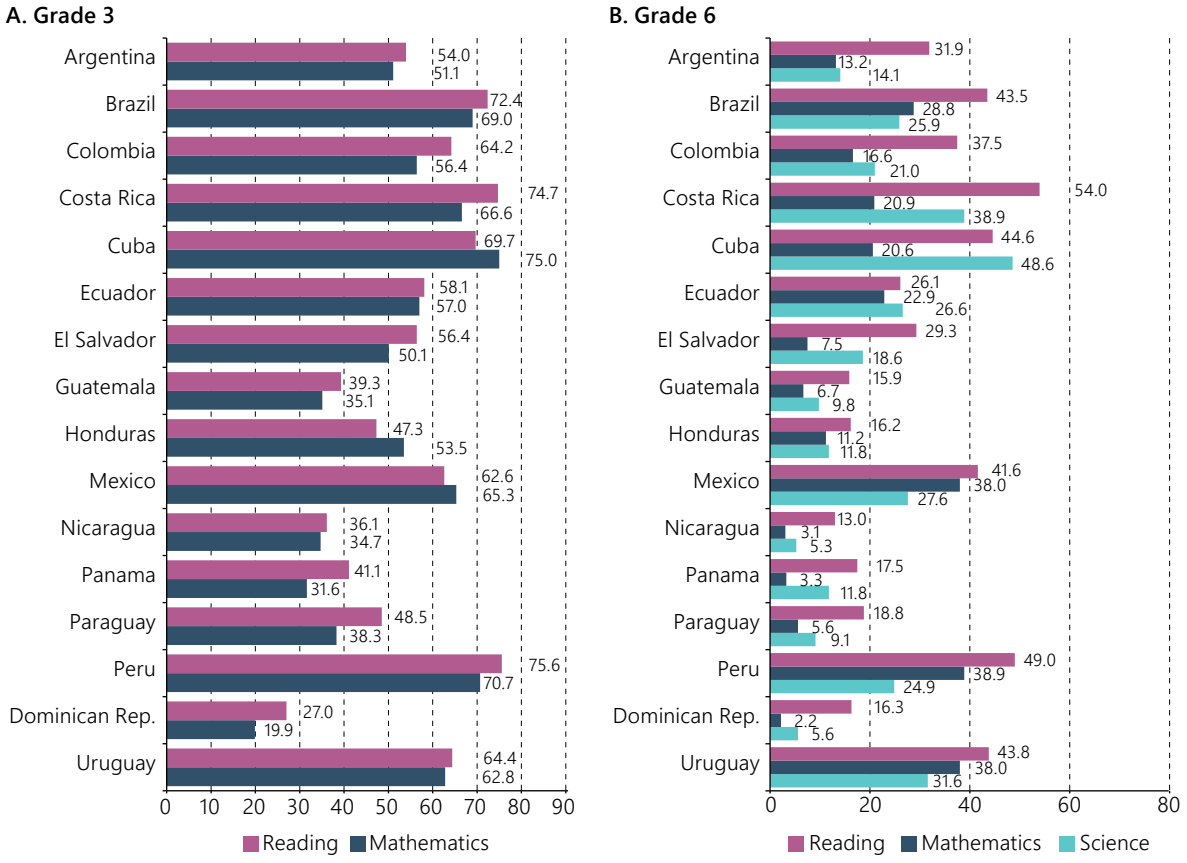
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ERCE 2019 data.
[a] Simple average of the 16 Latin American countries that participated in ERCE 2019: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay.

The ERCE 2019 average results for Latin American countries mask significant differences within the region. As shown in figures 15a and 15b, countries such as Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba and Peru consistently exhibit higher percentages of students meeting the minimum proficiency level in both grades 3 and 6 than the rest of the countries. In contrast, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic consistently exhibit the lowest percentages. In all countries, the percentage of students reaching the minimum proficiency level decreases when comparing results for grades 3 and 6, with the drop in mathematics being more significant than in reading, and steeper in Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay and El Salvador.

Unfortunately, the situation in secondary education is quite similar. The PISA 2018 measures knowledge and skills considered vital for full participation in society in 15-year-olds; in other words, it measures how and to what extent young people extrapolate what they have learned to unfamiliar contexts, both inside and outside school. In the 2018 edition, PISA added 79 countries, including 10 in Latin America,[8] and the focus of the assessment was reading proficiency, with mathematics, science, global competency and financial literacy as minor areas of assessment. Like the ERCE 2019 results, the PISA 2018 results also highlight the significant learning crisis in the region.

[8] The countries that participated in PISA 2018 are Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay.

Figure 15
Latin America (16 countries): percentage of students meeting the minimum proficiency level (MPL) by country in the ERCE 2019 report
(Percentages)

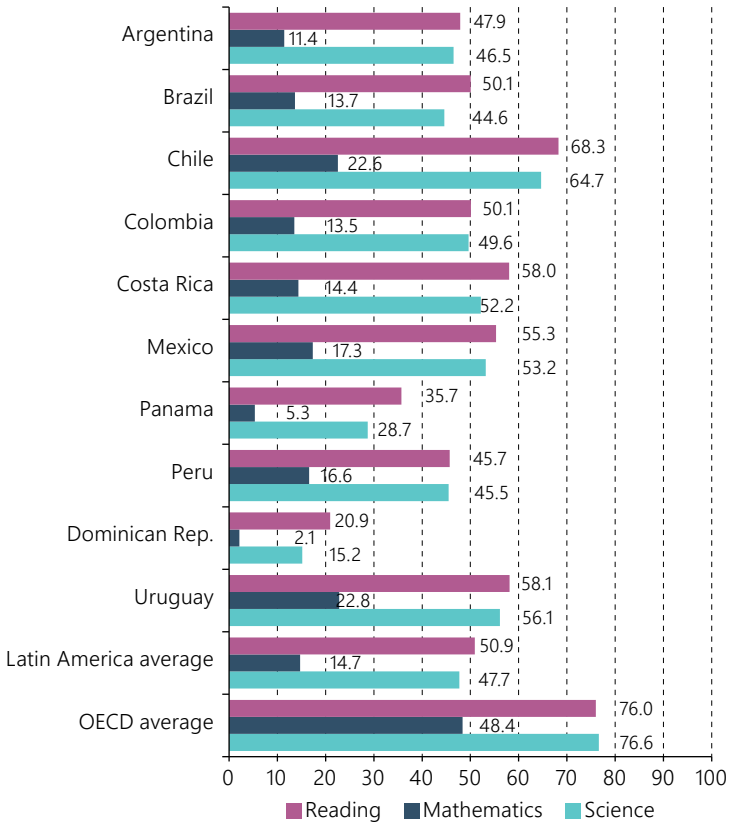


Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ERCE 2019 data.

Approximately half of 15-year-old students in the region do not reach the basic proficiency level[9] in reading and science, and more than four out of five students lack basic proficiency in mathematics (see figure 16). Specifically, in the reading assessment, results show that about 49% of students in Latin America —more than double the rate reported by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries (24%)— cannot identify the main idea of a text, connect pieces of information from different sources or reflect on the purpose and form of the texts read (both percentages are very similar in the science assessment). In the mathematics assessment, the percentage of students at the regional level who do not meet minimum proficiency levels (75%) is about 50% higher than the percentage reported by OECD countries (52%). Again, these findings include important differences between countries in the region: Chile, Uruguay and Costa Rica have the lowest percentages of low-performing students, while Panama and the Dominican Republic have the highest (see figure 16).

[9] PISA divides the numerical performance scales into eight proficiency levels (in ascending order: Level 1c, Level 1b, Level 1a, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, Level 5 and Level 6), each representing different types of knowledge and skills that increase in difficulty with each rising level. The OECD (2019) considers those below Level 2 as low achievers; however, it is important to note that, while this level can be considered a minimum, it is not a starting point from which individuals begin to develop their skills, nor is it an ultimate educational goal. In reading, attaining at least Level 2 means that students can identify the main idea of a medium-length text, find explicit information and reflect on the form and purpose of texts. Reaching this level in mathematics involves being able to represent a simple real-life situation. In science, it reflects that students can recognise explanations and conclusions for familiar scientific phenomena (OECD, 2019).

Figure 16
Latin America (10 countries) and OECD (37 countries): percentage of students achieving level 2 or above in PISA 2018 science, mathematics and reading tests by country[a]
(Percentages)

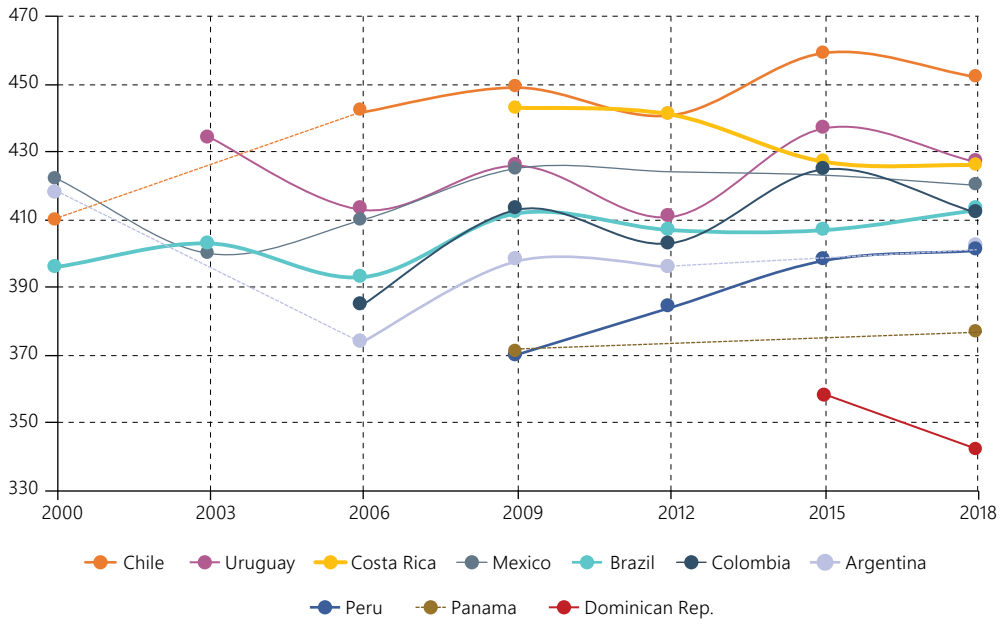


Source: Prepared by the authors based on the PISA 2018 data.
[a] Simple average for Latin America and the OECD (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States).

Similar to the stagnation of learning found in ERCE 2019 when comparing PISA 2018 reading results with those obtained in previous rounds, most countries in the region have not experienced considerable positive changes in their learning outcomes in secondary education over the last two decades: Peru, Chile and Colombia are the only three countries that show a positive trend in the findings, albeit one that is slowing, while Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay and Panama show relatively consistent results over time.[10] Moreover, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic show decreasing trends over the period analysed (see figure 17).

[10] Argentina and Uruguay show slight improvements in reading literacy in PISA 2018 compared with results from previous rounds; however, a long-term view shows that these improvements are recent. For example, while Argentina's reading test score in PISA 2018 is slightly higher than the average score in 2012, it is lower than in 2000.

Figure 17
Latin America (10 countries): change in Latin American countries' scores in the PISA reading test, 2000–2018
(Scores)



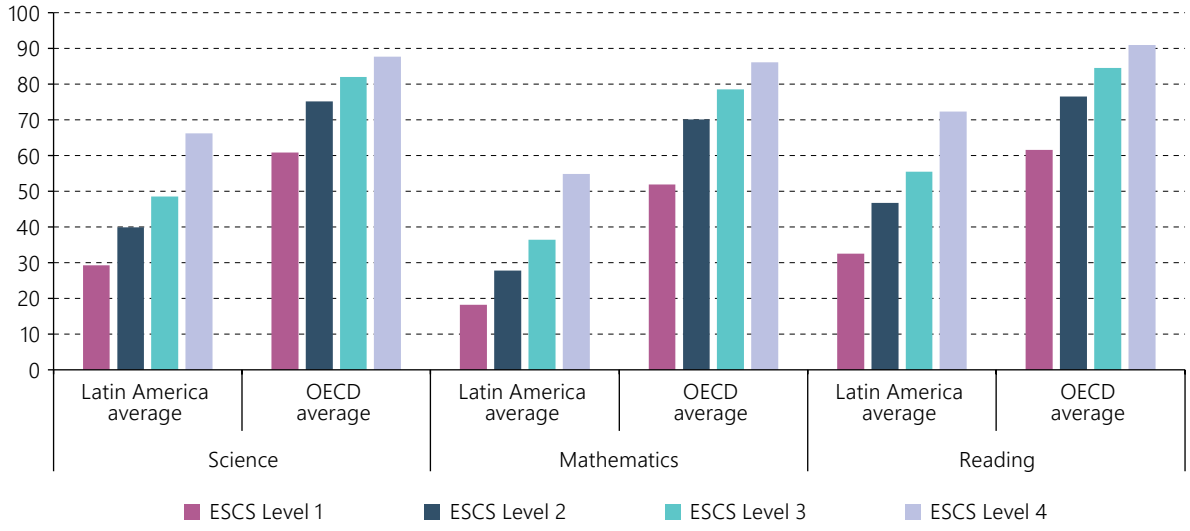
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the PISA series data (OCDE, 2019).

In addition to the existing learning gaps between students in the region compared to the rest of the world and between students in different Latin American countries, there are also important learning gaps within each country, particularly between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds. Figure 18 presents the average percentage of students reaching the minimum proficiency level in science, mathematics and reading tests by economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) quartile[11] for Latin American and OECD countries. According to figure 18, students in Latin America belonging to the first quartile[12] (or ESCS Level 1, i.e., the lowest level on the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status) always have, on average, a lower percentage of students reaching a minimum proficiency level, and that this percentage increases as the ESCS increases within each region or group of countries. While the disparity between the percentage of students achieving the minimum proficiency level in the first and fourth quartiles in Latin American and OECD countries is relatively similar (at least in mathematics), the percentage achieved by students from more disadvantaged backgrounds is significantly higher in OECD countries, exceeding in all areas the percentage of students achieving the minimum proficiency level in the third quartile of ESCS in Latin America.

[11] The Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status in PISA 2018 is a measurement constructed from different variables related to students' family backgrounds that are grouped into three equally weighted components: parental education, parental occupations and an index of household possessions that is considered a proxy for wealth or cultural capital (such as owning a car, having a quiet room to work in, access to the Internet, the number of books and other educational resources available in the home, among others).

[12] A quartile of students corresponds to 25% of the total number of students.

Figure 18
Latin America (10 countries) and OECD (37 countries): percentage of students achieving Level 2 or above in PISA 2018 testing based on the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status[a] (ESCS Index)
(Percentages)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the PISA 2018 data.
[a] Simple average for Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay) and the OECD (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States).

In addition to the role played by the socioeconomic and cultural status of households, the OECD (2019) highlights the role of schools in explaining inequality in learning outcomes within countries, arguing that the concentration of students of low socioeconomic and cultural status in certain schools undermines the education quality, as these schools have greater difficulties in attracting more qualified and experienced teachers and face greater obstacles in their teaching processes due to the lack or insufficiency of educational materials and physical infrastructure. Similarly, when analysing the associated factors that help explain differences in learning outcomes in ERCE 2019, UNESCO-OREALC (2021b) notes that the socioeconomic status of schools is the factor with the greatest impact on learning outcomes, even when controlling for the socioeconomic status of students, which once more points to the role of the region's high social segregation in educational outcomes. Indeed, UNESCO-OREALC's analysis (2021b) shows that between 40% and 50% of the differences in individual results in the ERCE 2019 depend on school characteristics, indicating that there is a significant margin for improving learning in the region through education policies that promote greater opportunities for students from more disadvantaged schools.

As Acosta (2022) argues, there is a strong link between the rural or urban status of schools and their public or private administration with the socioeconomic status of both the school and the students. These differentiating factors determine unequal access to learning opportunities, which was clear during the pandemic (Acosta, 2022). While private schools were able, for example, to transition to the virtual modality, as both students and teachers had Internet access and computers at home, students in public schools with their different modalities (traditional, technical and/or alternative) often accessed the Internet —when they had an effective Internet connection— from cellular phones or by sharing devices with other family members. Meanwhile, for rural schools, material access to the Internet and/or computers was even more difficult (Acosta, 2022). In short, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted pre-existing inequalities in education, and even aggravated them when the availability of these tools became a necessary condition for pedagogical and learning continuity.

The UNESCO-OREALC study (2021b) also underscores the central role of teachers in student learning. Among the factors with the greatest positive impact are teachers' interest in their students' general well-being and the personalised pedagogical support they provide, as well as the organisation and planning of the teaching process. Indeed, an analysis of the ERCE 2019 results shows that students achieve better educational outcomes when teachers take an interest in them and their learning and comfort them when they are sad or upset, as well as when students can positively manage their mistakes, thus staying motivated to participate and continue learning when subjects are difficult. It is also important for teachers to develop good practices in lesson planning, such as having the materials to be used prepared in advance, clearly stating the learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson and repeating them by recapitulating what has been learned at the end. These findings hold not only when controlling for the socioeconomic status of students and schools, but they are also consistent with the literature.

Indeed, academic research has shown that when teachers are sensitive to their students' interests and ideas and respond to their academic, social and emotional needs, students are more motivated to learn, achieve better academic results and exhibit greater self-regulation skills.[13] Likewise, when teachers take care to stimulate their students by connecting concepts, ideas and prior knowledge and designing challenging tasks, they not only encourage the development of complex cognitive skills, but also support them in becoming more aware of their own learning processes and thus learn to have more agency over them.[14] Finally, the literature also highlights that teachers who organise their lesson well have better results among their students, with higher levels of participation, autonomy and opportunities for learning, as well as fewer disciplinary problems.[15]

Other factors positively associated with educational attainments in ERCE 2019 are students' enrolment in pre-primary education,[16] the educational expectations of parents or caregivers and their involvement in students' learning, as well as the number of days students spend studying during the week (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b). Indeed, studies have shown that having a family or extracurricular schedule that facilitates the development of positive attitudes towards studying and independent study habits results in better learning outcomes and serves as a basis for later academic and personal development (in UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b) (Credé and Kuncel, 2008, in UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b). Similarly, students whose parents have high expectations for their children's education and are more frequently involved in learning activities (e.g., supporting them in reviewing or completing homework, showing interest in their children's grades or homework) have higher educational attainments, even when controlling for socioeconomic status. Meanwhile, among the factors with the greatest negative impact are grade repetition,[17] absenteeism,[18] belonging to an indigenous people (a considerable negative impact that does not disappear when controlling for a student's socioeconomic status, although it is only significant in grade 6) and a disruptive classroom climate with interruptions, altercations and distracting situations (which also maintain their negative impact even after controlling for the socioeconomic characteristics of students and schools) (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

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[13] See, for example, the research findings of Downer and others (2014), Hamre and Pianta (2005), Pianta and others (2008), Fauth and others (2014) and Ruzek and others (2016), in UNESCO-OREALC (2021c).

[14] See, for example, the research findings by Lipowsky and others (2009), Hamre and others (2013), Pianta and Hamre (2009) and Praetorius and others (2018), in UNESCO-OREALC (2021c).

[15] See, for example, the research findings by Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2012), Cameron, Connor and Morrison (2005), Pianta and others (2012) and Downer and others (2014 and 2015), in UNESCO-OREALC (2021c).

[16] Students who attend any pre-primary education programme, regardless of the type or duration of the programme, achieve better learning outcomes across all grades and disciplines assessed in ERCE 2019. With some exceptions, this positive effect persists even after controlling for the socioeconomic status of students' families (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

[17] Among the factors considered in the UNESCO-OREALC study (2021b), grade repetition is the factor with the greatest negative impact on learning outcomes. Students who have repeated at least one grade score an average of 65 points lower compared to those who have not repeated any grade, with this effect varying between 20 and 100 points depending on the country analysed (as a point of reference, the regional average of the tests was 700 points). This negative effect persists even after controlling for the socioeconomic status of students' families (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b). Given this negative correlation between grade repetition and educational attainment, some countries have eliminated grade repetition and obtained positive results by decreasing dropout rates (Cabrera-Hernández, 2021, in UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

[18] Students who report being absent two or more days per month show lower educational attainment in all countries that participated in ERCE 2019 (although the extent of the negative effect is different depending on the national context) (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021b).

Overall, the findings regarding the factors associated with learning confirm that educational processes do not operate in a vacuum, but are interconnected with the social, cultural, geographical and economic contexts in which they take place.

2. Deficits and gaps in educational attainment were present in different aspects of comprehensive education

As mentioned above, quality education is not limited to basic cognitive skills (such as language, mathematics and science) and complex skills (specialised learning), but also includes preparing children, adolescents and young people for life; that is, to equip them with the knowledge, skills and values they need to become accomplished and productive citizens and contribute to building democratic, environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive societies. Today's children, adolescents and young people are facing an unprecedented situation in human history, with global challenges that have never been experienced. In addition to the challenges associated with the climate crisis and the technological change that is rapidly transforming the functioning of the global economy and national labour markets, children, adolescents and youth in Latin America also face specific challenges related to the region's high levels of social and economic inequality, including high rates of exposure to violence and political, economic and social instability.

Socioemotional skills, understood as the set of skills related to the ability to adapt to different life contexts, are particularly relevant in the contemporary world, characterised by change and uncertainty. The experience of school closures during the pandemic highlighted the importance of learning more than only cognitive skills; skills like flexibility, adaptability, stress management, collaboration, empathy and creativity were crucial for coping with the abrupt shift to remote education and mitigating the negative impacts of the crisis (Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes, 2020; Berger, 2021). Furthermore, in the context of the health emergency, it became clear that no one learns alone, revealing the importance of the role of teachers and families in the teaching and learning processes, and that students need socioemotional well-being and motivation to learn. In other words, the pandemic experience underscored that education requires care and support networks, and that it is built collectively (UNICEF, 2021a).

Children, adolescents and youth need to develop cognitive and socioemotional skills to fully develop their potential and find fulfilment in the contemporary world, both personally and professionally. In this regard, as shown in table 2, ECLAC/OEI (2020) identifies three key socioemotional skills for the twenty-first century: (i) communication skills, which include the ability to manage information, negotiate and represent ideas schematically, among others; (ii) collaboration skills, which include empathy and the ability to work on a team; and (iii) autonomy skills, which include inquiry, perseverance and self-regulation. Furthermore, the report notes that in the context of the fourth technological revolution, characterised by technological substitution and the use of artificial intelligence to perform routine tasks (both simple and complex), these skills will be increasingly valued in labour markets. As such, it is imperative that education systems integrate socioemotional skills development in their teaching processes to prepare and support students to enter the labour market.

In recent years, education systems in the region have made progress in including social and emotional skills into their teaching processes: most countries have incorporated them into their curricula or learning standards, several have developed guidelines to implement these standards and promote their development in schools, and some have made efforts to train teachers on developing and assessing social and emotional skills. However, the region still faces significant challenges in effectively incorporating the teaching and learning of social and emotional skills in its schools. In this regard, Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes (2020) identify four main challenges facing education systems in the region: (i) clearly defining the most important skills to develop at each stage of the life cycle and what levels of attainment are expected; (ii) developing measurements that allow diagnoses to be made about the status and progress

of these skills in students; (iii) establishing guidelines and strategies to implement learning standards and effectively develop socioemotional skills in schools; and (iv) fostering the training and support that teachers receive to develop their own emotional skills and draw from pedagogical practices that allow them to develop those skills in their students.

For the first time since its initial implementation in 1997, the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality in Education (LLECE) added an instrument in the ERCE 2019 to measure three socioemotional skills in sixth graders. The skills incorporated in the study were empathy (i.e., the ability to recognise others' perspectives in a cognitive and emotional sense); openness to diversity (i.e., the ability to understand, respect and relate positively to those perceived as different from oneself); and self-regulation in a school environment (i.e., the ability to effectively regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours in order to persevere towards the desired learning outcome). The results show a trend towards positive student responses in all three skills assessed, but also exhibit significant differences between and within countries in the region (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021c).

Regarding differences between countries, Cuba stands out in the region for the positive results of its students in each of the three skills, while Brazil and Mexico do so negatively in the results of empathy and self-regulation, along with Paraguay in openness to diversity. Additionally, with respect to the differences between the findings of different students within countries, the study highlights the role of individual and family factors, such as socioeconomic status,[19] gender[20] and pre-primary education enrolment,[21] in explaining disparities in the development of socioemotional skills (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021c). In line with the ongoing challenges of incorporating and effectively implementing the teaching of socioemotional skills in schools in the region, the ERCE 2019 results suggest that the socioemotional skills studied are more closely linked to individual and family factors than to school-related factors and that, even when schools have an effect on socioemotional skills, this effect is much smaller than the effect they have on learning outcomes in subjects such as mathematics, language and science. It is important to note that this finding does not mean that schools do not influence socioemotional skills, but rather that, at present, they are not playing an especially relevant role given the absence of educational policies in the region that provide tools and clarify protocols and standards for developing these types of skills in the classroom (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021c).

Undoubtedly, for schools to be able to develop students' socioemotional skills, teachers must first receive adequate training to incorporate them into their teaching practices (IDB, 2021). The 2018 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reports on teachers' perceptions of professional development they receive and their classroom practices. Although most of teachers surveyed in Brazil, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires in Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico affirm that socioemotional skills are included in their initial and continuing training, the survey's findings show that teachers do not feel prepared to teach these skills and therefore need better training (Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes, 2020). In other words, teachers require more tools to develop their students' socioemotional skills (Jones and others, 2013). Furthermore, teachers' socioemotional skills influence the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Scientific evidence suggests that teachers who can regulate their emotions and maintain a positive attitude in the classroom tend to have closer and warmer interactions with their students (Jones, Bouffard and Weissbourd, 2013). Teachers are also role models for their students and thus schools should encourage interventions in three key areas: (i) programmes aimed at improving teacher-student relationships; (ii) initiatives to promote socioemotional skills in students that include training for teachers; and (iii) programmes to develop teachers' socioemotional skills (Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes, 2020; IDB, 2021).

[19] In most of the countries that participated in ERCE 2019, there is a positive association between the socioeconomic status of students' families and their proficiency in the three skills studied, and especially in openness to diversity.

[20] Across all countries participating in the survey, girls report significantly higher levels in all three socioemotional skills assessed in ERCE 2019.

[21] Enrolment in pre-primary education is positively associated with the development of socioemotional skills, although not in all countries and not for all skills assessed in ERCE 2019.

Finally, another aspect that highlights the relevance of the development of socioemotional skills and the key role of schools in that development is the demands of the world of work. In a knowledge economy where socioemotional skills (also known as soft skills) such as critical thinking, problem-solving or communication are increasingly necessary, companies expect an even greater capacity for cooperation and empathy from their employees, as well as better management of emotions, to communicate with their peers and customers (Bassi and others, 2012). In conclusion, given the key role of schools in the development of students' socioemotional skills and the acquisition of the soft skills demanded by the ever-evolving labour market, it is crucial to both implement active policies for teacher training in this area and make them a core part of the curricular agenda in the countries of the region.

B. Inequitable impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes

Before the emergence and spread of COVID-19 around the world, Latin America and the Caribbean were already experiencing a major learning crisis. If urgent measures are not implemented to recover the learning loss associated with prolonged school closures —which can be understood as the combination of forgotten learning and learning that could not be achieved due to the interruption of the normal educational process— (Azevedo and others, 2021), the pandemic will deepen the inequality in educational attainment that already existed in the region (Almeyda and others, 2022).

The World Bank (2022) estimates the effect of the pandemic on learning loss in the region using information on school closures and partial opening periods in different countries, ERCE 2019 findings and macroeconomic projections. With these data, it constructs different scenarios based on various assumptions regarding the percentage of schools that remained closed in the countries during the respective periods of partial opening. On average, the estimates show a loss of 1 to 1.8 learning-adjusted years of schooling (in the optimistic or pessimistic scenario for the number of schools closed in periods of partial opening, respectively)[22], with higher relative losses (compared to the level of pre-pandemic learning) in those countries that were already more disadvantaged.

Assuming an intermediate effectiveness of remote teaching and learning processes, the World Bank (2022) estimates an increase of 17 percentage points in the percentage of third graders who would not reach the minimum proficiency level in mathematics and 13 percentage points in the percentage of students who would not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading. Regarding sixth graders, estimates indicate an increase of 10 percentage points in the percentage of students who would not reach the minimum proficiency level in mathematics and 20 percentage points in reading. Thus, the estimates suggest a significant increase in the percentage of students who would fail to reach minimum proficiency levels following the pandemic, with the impact on sixth graders' reading skills being particularly strong (World Bank, 2022).

Finally, based on the available data on returning to school, life expectancy and labour market variables in the region, the World Bank (2022) estimates that, in an optimistic scenario, an average student in Latin America and the Caribbean could lose about 7% of the income he or she would earn over the course of his or her entire career. In aggregate terms, the impact of the pandemic on skills development and worker productivity exacerbates the economic crisis in the region, as estimates indicate that learning losses will translate into a regional economic cost of 1.5 trillion US dollars (in 2017 PPP dollars) in the optimistic scenario, equivalent to 16% of regional gross domestic product (GDP). In the intermediate scenario, the loss would correspond to 2.3 trillion US dollars and 24.7% of regional GDP.

[22] In the optimistic scenario, 50% of schools are open during partial opening periods, while in the pessimistic scenario, just 15% are open.

Unfortunately, comparable data are not yet available that would provide a more accurate picture of the exact degree of the impact of the post-pandemic education crisis. In 2020, most countries in the region postponed or suspended their learning assessments due to the major obstacles they faced in conducting them. And while many countries reinstated their assessments in 2021, in most cases the results are not yet available (World Bank, 2022). According to the information collected through the World Bank/OECD global survey of education ministries, 42% of countries reported having conducted formative classroom-level assessments in 2020, replacing standardised assessments at the national or subnational level. In many cases this involved systematising a new practice, which was consolidated in 2021 (Tejada and others, 2022).

In the cases of Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Uruguay, formative assessments were an initiative led by ministries of education at the national level (see boxes 5 and 6), while in Peru and Colombia, they were managed by private organisations (Tejada and others, 2022). Brazil stands out for having accelerated a process already under way, the Formative Diagnosis and Assessment programme, a platform designed by the Public Policy and Educational Assessment Centre (*Centro de Políticas Públicas e Avaliação da Educação*) of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (CAED/UFJF) (Ministério da Educação, 2022). This platform uses assessments aligned with the new National Basic Common Curriculum (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular* – BNCC) to give the federal government access to centrally available data on a regular basis to have an accurate picture the situation across the country. The various formative assessment initiatives initiated or expanded during the pandemic are a fundamental supplement to standardised evaluations and constitute a major step forward in finally building an effective and reliable monitoring and diagnostic system in the region.

Box 5
The Comprehensive Learning Assessment in Chile

Chile stands out as the country in the region with the strongest tradition of using standardised quality assessments through the Education Quality Measurement Mechanism (*Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación* – SIMCE). In both 2020 and 2021, Chile suspended the SIMCE assessments due to the pandemic situation and the potential risks, which could prevent consistent coverage of the test and affect the validity, reliability and comparability of the instruments.

However, Chile decided to replace SIMCE monitoring with the plan "Juntos Chile se recupera y aprende" [Together Chile recovers and learns], which included, among other elements, the creation of the Comprehensive Learning Assessment (*Diagnóstico Integral de Aprendizajes* – DIA) platform. The DIA was a tool for voluntary use by schools that sought not only to understand knowledge acquisition during school closures but also gain insight into students' socioemotional status.

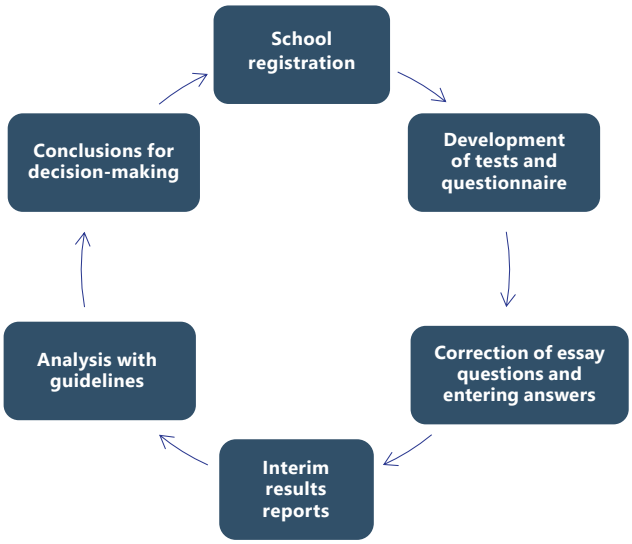
The DIA is a clear example of formative assessments adopted by several countries in the region in 2020. Implementing these assessments involved a feedback loop for improvement, organised in three stages:

(i) Assessment: to establish a baseline at the beginning of the school year.

(ii) Interim monitoring: to learn about students' progress and difficulties.

(iii) Final evaluation: to have information on outcomes at the end of the school year.

Cycle of the Comprehensive Learning Assessment:



In 2021, the Ministry of Education decided to expand the assessment to include the DIALECT and DIAMAT platforms to assess the reading comprehension and mathematics of primary school students in grades 1 and 2.

Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of the Chilean Education Quality Assurance Agency (*Agencia de Calidad de la Educación de Chile* (2022)) and Tejada and others (2022).

Box 6
The education response in São Paulo

São Paulo, one of the largest education subsystems in the region with 3.5 million students and more than 5,000 schools, was one of the fastest and most efficient in providing a set of responses to school closures. Two initiatives are especially notable. The first was the creation of the Education Media Centre[a], a web portal from which audiovisual content was produced and disseminated for educational continuity during school closures. The Education Media Centre was an expansion of an earlier project in the State of São Paulo in 2007, which focused on sharing educational content via television or streaming for small villages located around the Amazon River (Vincent-Lancrin and others, 2022).

The second initiative implemented in 2020 is the "Programa de Recuperación y Profundización del Aprendizaje en São Paulo" [Programme for the recovery and deepening of learning in São Paulo]. The programme comprises a formative assessment within the public education system and seeks to link curricula, learning materials and digital assessment. The programme's objectives included making resources available to the São Paulo Ministry of Education for the continuity of teaching and learning in public schools as well as training teachers on how to use these resources for distance learning. The platform, called "Plataforma e Actividades de Aprendizaje e Evaluación Formativa de São Paulo" [São Paulo platform and activities for learning and assessment], allowed the Ministry of Education to provide teachers with teaching materials as well as students' formative assessment tools, in line with the prioritisation of content from the Brazilian National Basic Common Curriculum (BNCC). Additionally, the Ministry of Education distributed 500,000 mobile chips with Internet data to students and another 250,000 to teachers to ensure access to the platform's content (Reimers and Opertti, 2021).

The formative assessments offered on the platform, linked to the BNCC, included standardised multiple-choice tests of learning implemented every two months and were available from grade 1 of primary school to the third year of secondary school (Reimers and Opertti, 2021). Second, the platform offered a diagnostic assessment that was applied on a sample basis to students from the first year of primary school to the third year of secondary school in order to assess the impact on learning. The information from the assessments, which was not published, helped the State of São Paulo learn about the difficulties faced by students and subsequently promote policies informed by the data collected through the platform (Reimers and Opertti, 2021).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Reimers and Opertti (2021) and EFAPE (2022).
[a] [Online] https://centrodemidiasp.educacao.sp.gov.br/o-que-e-o-centro-de-midias/.

Despite the relative lack of data, the information available so far suggests that the pandemic has deepened inequalities in learning outcomes that existed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Most of the national assessments available to date show that while learning losses are affecting all students in the region, they are particularly significant among younger and lower-grade students, those from lower-income households and, in some cases, among girls and female adolescents (World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, currently available data also reveal important differences between countries in the region. Uruguay, for example, was relatively better prepared than the rest of the countries to adapt to remote education due to its previous implementation of the Ceibal Plan and because it was the first country in Latin America to reopen its schools. The results of the Aristas assessment, conducted in 2017 and 2020, contrast with national assessments in other countries and with the various impact projections in the region in that they do not show, on average, a significant reduction in learning outcomes for students in grades 3 and 6 at the primary school level. That said, an unequal effect of the pandemic is observed on Uruguayan students' educational attainment, where those who showed greater educational disengagement when schools were closed were mostly from lower-income households and had lower levels of attainment in both reading and mathematics than their peers. This finding underscores the need to coordinate education policies with other public policies such as social protection in order to address the aspects of the crisis that, while not directly related to education (such as increases in poverty and the potential increase in child and adolescent labour), do have an impact on educational attainment. Nevertheless, the data seem to reinforce the need to implement differentiated strategies to promote educational reintegration and prevent child labour in the context of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

C. The fundamental role of socioemotional well-being in the recovery process

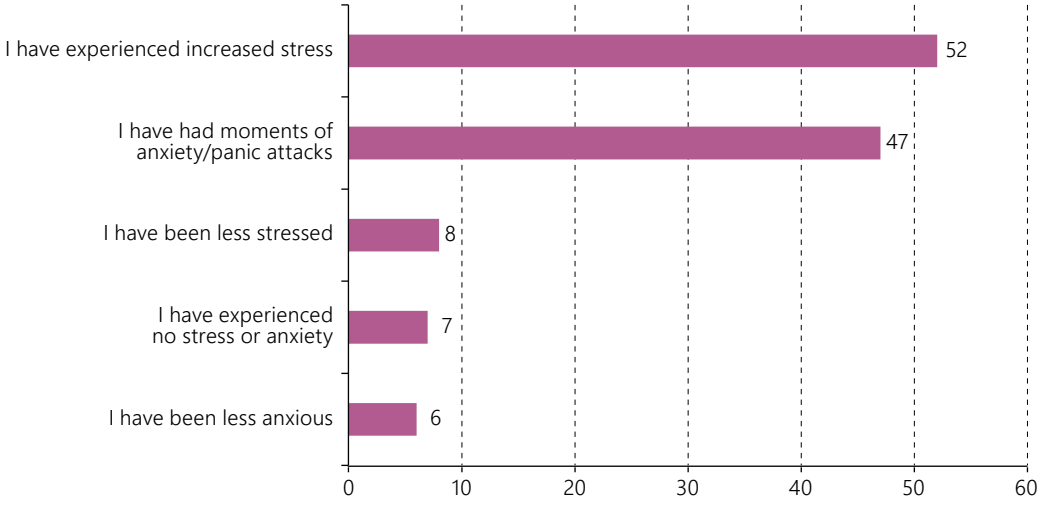
In addition to the impact on cognitive skills acquisition, the prolonged school closures in Latin America limited the opportunities for interaction that children and adolescents had with peers and adults outside their close circles. The school closures not only hindered socialisation processes and students' holistic development but it also had a significant impact on the socioemotional health of many students. In September 2020, UNICEF conducted a survey to find out about the feelings adolescents and young people aged 13 to 29 were experiencing due to the pandemic in 9 countries and territories in the region. 27% of the more than 8,400 participants reported feeling anxious, 15% felt depressed and 46% said they were less motivated to do activities they normally enjoyed. Moreover, while 73% reported feeling the need to ask for help regarding their physical and mental well-being, 40% did not do so, with this percentage being slightly higher for women (43%). Similarly, regarding their perception of the future, a higher percentage of young women reported feeling pessimistic compared to their male peers (46% versus 31%, respectively) (UNICEF, 2020a).

Similarly, exploratory studies conducted by the Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean, using online surveys of young people aged 15 to 29 during the pandemic, confirm that these years of prolonged crisis have significantly impacted their mental health. According to data from the first United Nations survey on Latin American and Caribbean youth within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted in 2020,[23] half of the respondents reported experiencing increased stress, and 47% reported having moments of anxiety or panic attacks during confinement periods (see figure 19). In the second survey, conducted in 2021,[24] 72% of respondents reported that the crisis has impacted their mental health, with symptoms including stress (26%), increased anxiety (22%), depression (22%) and sleeping difficulties (17%) (see figure 20).

[23] A total of 7,751 young people aged 15 to 29 from 39 countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean participated.

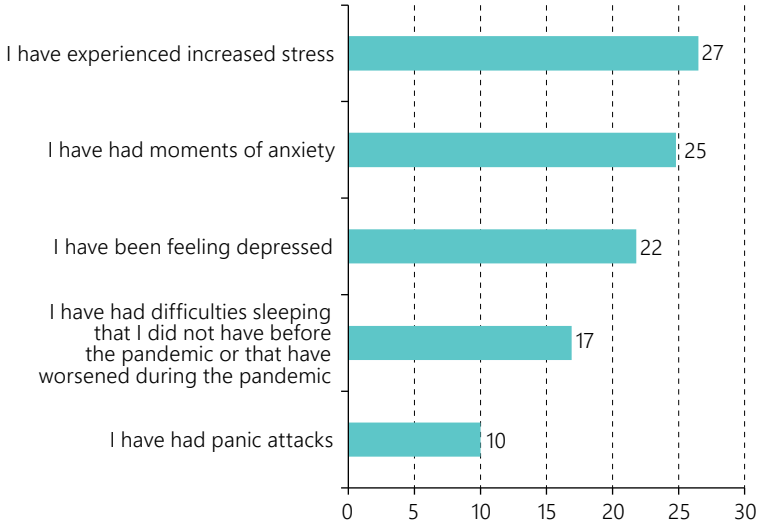
[24] A total of 46,649 young people aged 15 to 29 from 42 countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean participated, but the vast majority of participants were from Mexico.

Figure 19
Latin America and the Caribbean: mental health status of young people aged 15 to 29 during the confinement, 2020
(Percentages)



Source: Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean, "United Nations survey on Latin American and Caribbean youth within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" (LC/TS.2021/68) (2021).

Figure 20
Latin America and the Caribbean: mental health status of young people aged 15 to 29 during the pandemic, 2021
(Percentages)

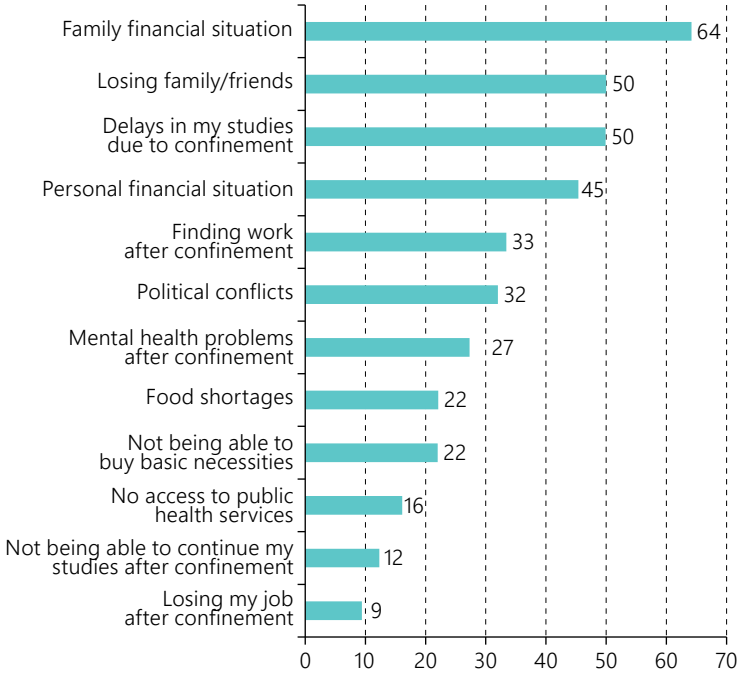


Source: Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean, "Second United Nations survey on Latin American and Caribbean youth within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Report of results" (LC/TS.2022/138) (2022).

In the first survey conducted by the Working Group on Youth during the pandemic, concerns about the family's financial situation emerged as the top worry among young people. This finding points to the importance of strengthening social protection systems and fostering greater coordination with education policies, particularly during the post-COVID-19 recovery process. As noted throughout this document, education occurs within social, cultural and economic contexts, and improving the conditions in which children, adolescents and young people grow up and develop is a key factor in supporting them in their educational process and redressing underlying inequalities. After concerns about the family financial situation, falling behind in school is among the main worries of young people. This issue was mentioned by half of the respondents

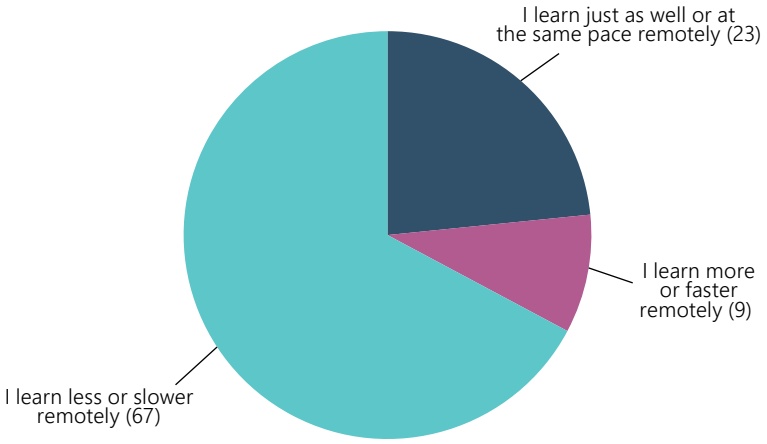
aged 15 to 29 (moreover, when only 15- to 19-year-olds are considered, this concern is shared by 70% of the respondents). In this regard, the second survey indicates that most young people attending virtual classes perceive greater difficulties in distance learning compared to face-to-face classes (see figures 21 and 22).

Figure 21
Latin America and the Caribbean: main concerns of young people aged 15 to 29 regarding the future, 2020
(Percentages)



Source: Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean , "United Nations survey on Latin American and Caribbean youth within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" (LC/TS.2021/68) (2021).

Figure 22
Latin America and the Caribbean: perceptions of learning among 15- to 29-year-olds studying remotely because of the pandemic, 2021
(Percentages)



Source: Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean "Second United Nations survey on Latin American and Caribbean youth within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Report of results" (LC/TS.2022/138) (2022).

On the other hand, ECLAC, together with the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO), Norwegian cooperation and the UNICEF regional office conducted a regional study on secondary education during the 2019 and 2020 period, and the findings are in line with those already mentioned. The study included the pandemic experience of students in six countries in the region (Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay) and one of the cross-cutting findings among adolescents and young people, regardless of their conditions of origin, is the disengagement and lack of motivation resulting from this distance-learning experience (Acosta, 2022):

> "Dad lost his job; he gets sad and I get sad and I don't want to do anything. Because I was in class, but I was kind of checked out."
> (Focus group on expected trajectory in lower secondary, Uruguay)

> "It's hard for me to stay connected all the time, no matter how interested I am in the class. It's draining. I get really tired of being in front of the screen for so long."
> (Female student, elite programmes, national universities, Argentina)

> "As for online classes, I think there are more cons than pros. I think that you almost never learn this way. For me, it's impossible to understand some subjects, and taking tests without understanding is pointless..."
> (Male student, upper secondary, traditional track, Honduras)

Changes in students' living situations undoubtedly had an impact on their engagement with schooling. The general perception seems to be one of loss, although some students' feedback shows that learning processes did continue (Acosta, 2022). The negative impact on students' socioemotional well-being and mental health, as well as that of their families and caregivers, along with their teachers who had to adapt and take on significant extra workloads during this period, started to become clear when schools began reopening (see box 7). During this period of prolonged and silent crisis in education, the importance of caring adults in the learning processes —teachers, guardians and families or caregivers—has become even more evident (Acosta, 2022):

> "I live alone with my mum, and she didn't finish high school and I don't have someone to say, 'Look, this is how it is.' I don't have that. So, I have to try to figure it all out myself or look things up on YouTube or Google. It's very hard."
> (Female student, public secondary school, Argentina)

> "I consider it [the relationship with their teachers] to be very good because when I have a question or need something, the teachers are there to answer us whenever we need them. They give us the information and take care of us."
> (CEMSaD high school student in rural Chiapas, Mexico)

> "There were teachers who during the pandemic just left —only two or three stayed."
> (Focus group with upper secondary students, trajectory with lag, Uruguay)

> "I've always had the support of my mother, my siblings and a special teacher who supports me a lot —Patricia [in charge of the library]— since the first semester and she still helps me with things that are very difficult for me."
> (Female student, COBACH high school in an urban area of Mexico City, Mexico)

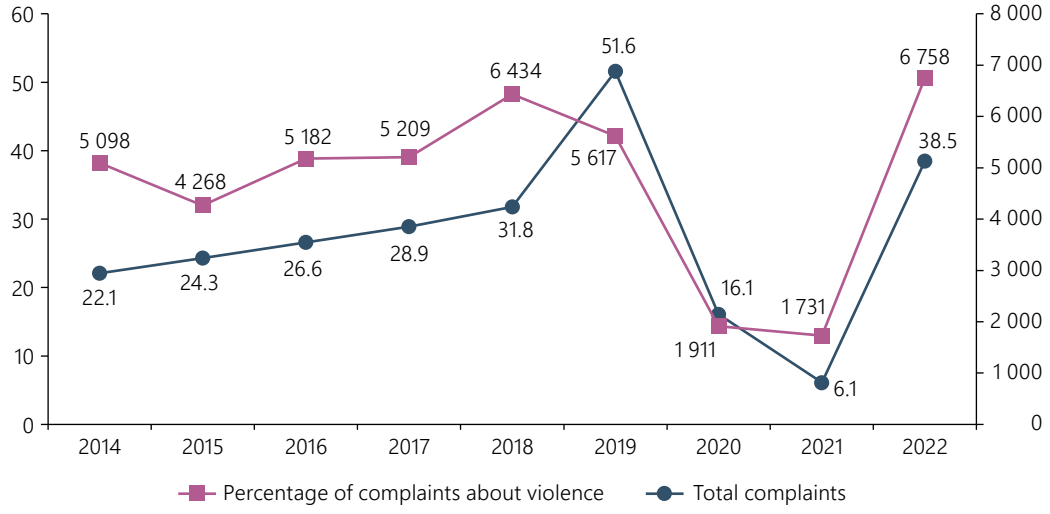
Box 7
Violence with the return to face-to-face classes in Chile

Overall, the effects of the pandemic have been devastating in many ways. In addition to being a major health and economic crisis, the forced closure of schools as a protective measure against the COVID-19 virus has meant much more than lost classes and delayed learning for children and adolescents. Most schools in the region were partially or completely closed for 70 weeks. From March 2020, remote systems were implemented to keep the education system functioning. As the months went by, it became clear that schools, teaching staff and families were very unequally prepared to deal with this situation. The availability of equipment and Internet connections at home, the use of educational platforms by schools and the consequent training of their teachers, as well as the possibility for families to support their children and adolescents all combined to ensure that, in practice, students have had profoundly unequal educational experiences.

In Chile, the school year officially started on March 2nd, 2022 and the Ministry of Education proclaimed that as of that date all schools were required to conduct their activities and classes in person, regardless of the phase of the "Paso a Paso" [Step by Step][a] plan they were in. To reduce people's reluctance to send their children to school for fear of infection, a series of measures were implemented, including the vaccination of teachers and children, COVID-19 school insurance and the provision of protective health kits, as well as the expansion of budgets and funding for schools to adapt their infrastructure and procedures to this safe[b] return.

During the first month of face-to-face classes, there were reports of unusual violence in schools. Fistfights between students in the hallways and on playgrounds, knife attacks outside schools, assaults on teachers and even a suicide attempt in the school itself, as well as threats of armed attacks inside the schools, were publicised in the print media, on radio and television, online and on social media. On 28 March 2022, the Minister of Education indicated that the Superintendence of Education had received a total of 1,500 complaints in the first month of school alone, 30% of which involved violence —a majority of which involved physical and psychological abuse between students— which exceeded the figures from pre-pandemic years. The statistics of the Superintendence of Education from 2014 to 2022, cumulative through the second quarter of each year, were reviewed based on the complaints filed by the respective issue. The graph shows that the number of total complaints had varied from year to year, with the highest being when face-to-face classes resumed. However, the proportion of abuse and discrimination complaints has steadily increased since 2014. In 2020 and 2021, the figures were markedly lower in both data sets.

Total complaints and complaints of violence to the Superintendence of Education, 2014–2022
(In total numbers and percentage of complaints of violence,[a] cumulative through the second quarter of the school year)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on statistics on total complaints and complaints of abuse and discrimination from the Superintendence of Education. [Online] https://www.supereduc.cl/categoria-estudios-estadisticas/estadisticas/.
[a] Includes abuse of teachers and education assistants, abuse of students and discrimination. The indicators are: abuse from student against teacher and/or education assistant; abuse from parent against teacher and/or education assistant; physical abuse from adult to student; physical abuse between students; psychological abuse from adult against student; psychological

abuse between students; discrimination based on physical characteristics and/or personal appearance; discrimination based on physical and/or intellectual disability; discrimination based on pregnancy and maternity; discrimination based on gender identity; discrimination based on religious belief; discrimination based on health problems (HIV, epilepsy or others); discrimination based on being an immigrant of a different racial origin; discrimination based on attention deficit disorder and others.

The fact that reports of violence between students, towards teachers and towards other students[c] are steadily increasing shows that the school environment is not exempt from the phenomenon of violent acts becoming more common in everyday life. Could this have something to do with the fact that we live in a society that is ill-equipped to resolve conflicts peacefully? In 2019, the results of the first citizenship education study with eighth grade[d] students in Chile were presented and the results indicate that one in three students disagreed with the statement that peace is achieved through dialogue and negotiation and felt that violence or physical force was a means to achieve what they wanted.

Various studies indicate that violence in general, and in schools in particular, is a phenomenon based on multiple factors; while the pandemic may not be the cause of these acts of violence, it could be considered a trigger for the increase in cases. Some of the elements associated with the long period of distance learning that could help explain the violent acts seen in schools include:

- Sustained confinement without peer relationships would have considerably diminished the capacity for non-violent conflict resolution among children, adolescents and young people.
- The pandemic had unprecedented impacts on the quality of life of families, in terms of not only impoverishment but also experiences of losing loved ones and increased domestic violence, which led to a significant accumulation of feelings of stress, fear, anger, grief and frustration that have not been adequately processed.
- With the return to face-to-face classes, schools have likely placed insufficient emphasis on the socioemotional aspects of reuniting school communities, focusing more on getting back into routines and catching up on learning.
- The exponential increase in online activities of children and adolescents outside the school environment, which was already very high before the pandemic, has also led to an area of interaction where situations of harassment and abuse are extremely frequent and not adequately mediated (Trucco and Palma, 2020).

In the wake of the events already known and in this new context of returning to school, specialists and educators have issued a range of opinions, nearly all of them focusing on emphasising elements of socioemotional skills development rather than punitive measures. Sixty days after schools reopened, the Chilean government announced the implementation of the Comprehensive Educational Reactivation Policy "Seamos Comunidad"[e] [Let's Be a Community], which seeks to help address the effects of the pandemic on educational communities in key factors such as harmonious conditions at school, mental health, comprehensive learning recovery, improved infrastructure conditions, connectivity and digital transformation and student retention in the education system.[f]

Violence in schools violates the right of children to grow up in an environment that promotes their physical and mental health and spiritual well-being, as well as the right to protection from abuse and discrimination, both of which are included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Trucco and Inostroza, 2017). For educational institutions to be a safe space that promotes students' holistic development, resources and support that allow for the appropriate resolution of interpersonal conflicts by deepening socioemotional skills are always necessary, particularly during these complex times.

The data on the violent acts during the first month of face-to-face classes in Chile shows how complex the return to school is proving to be and opens the way for closer monitoring of its impact on students' quality of life and learning. Interacting with others again and making use of appropriate interpersonal skills is a significant challenge after two years of confinement. The daily experience in the school environment is one of the fundamental elements of learning to live with others and this socialisation process was severely disrupted when face-to-face classes were suspended.

Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of D. Trucco and P. Inostroza (2017), "Las violencias en el espacio escolar" Project document (LC/TS.2017/15), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); D. Trucco and A. Palma (2020), "Infancia y adolescencia en la era digital: un informe comparativo de los estudios de Kids Online del Brasil, Chile, Costa Rica y el Uruguay", Project documents (LC/TS.2020/18/REV.1), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

[a] The Chilean government's "Step by Step" plan outlines the phases, characteristics and measures to be taken to control the coronavirus pandemic.

[b] See [Online] https://www.mineduc.cl/protocolos-de-prevencion-para-la-vuelta-a-clases-2022/#:~:text=EL%202%20de%20marzo%20de,en%20la%20que%20se%20encuentren.

[c] Data for the different types of violence reported are available for all years except 2022.

[d] First national study on citizenship education that explored three aspects: civic knowledge, democratic attitudes and values, and willingness to participate in a democracy. It was conducted in 2017 with eighth grade students. [Online] http://archivos.agenciaeducacion.cl/Presentacion_resultados_Estudio_Nacional_Formacion_Ciudadana.pdf and https://www.mineduc.cl/primer-estudio-nacional-de-formacion-ciudadana/.
[e] See [Online] https://seamoscomunidad.mineduc.cl/.
[f] See the national Return strategy for Costa Rica (*Estrategia Regresar*), [Online] https://mep.go.cr/sites/default/files/inf-estrategia-regresar.pdf; and for Mexico (*Estrategia Nacional para el Regreso Seguro a Clases Presenciales en las Escuelas de Educación Básica*), [Online] https://educacionbasica.sep.gob.mx/multimedia/RSC/BASICA/Documento/202105/202105-RSC-qOIksgis3w-ESTRATEGIANACIONAL_REGRESO_CLASES.pdf.

Finally, an assessment conducted by the Fundación Contextos among young people in El Salvador found that the socioemotional well-being of students during the pandemic was impacted by many factors other than the loss of spaces and daily dynamics that allowed them to spend time with their peers. They also had to deal with the feeling that they were not learning, stress and confusion about their own learning process in the context of remote education, academic overload (saturation of tasks and focus on syllabus content and not on socioemotional processes) and the responsibility of managing their own learning process, without necessarily having help from teachers or the tools to do this. In addition to the impact of school closures on adolescents, there was the impact of periods of confinement, in particular, the overload of caregiving that mainly affected adolescent girls and young women and interrupted their educational activities, overcrowding and a lack of privacy and adequate spaces for study, the blurring of the boundaries between rest, leisure, study and work and the lack of recognition they faced in their homes and communities as relevant actors, sometimes feeling treated with indifference, stigma or prejudice (Bodewig, 2021).

The abrupt shift to remote education not only affected students. It also meant a major disruption in teachers' work, which came with costs to their socioemotional well-being. This is especially true considering that most teachers in the region are women, who also took on a greater share of caregiving during the pandemic. A range of national research has been conducted on the effect of the pandemic on teachers' socioemotional well-being. For example, in Brazil, the Instituto Península surveyed teachers' feelings and perceptions in 2020 (four rounds of surveys from March to November). The findings show that teachers felt increasingly overburdened and tired during the first year of the pandemic, with their main concerns being the physical and mental health of their students, even above their own or their family's health. In addition, 84% of teachers felt unprepared or underprepared for distance learning (most had no previous experience); this percentage was more than 10 percentage points higher among early childhood teachers compared to upper secondary teachers (89% and 77%, respectively) (Ferraz, 2021; Instituto Península, 2020). Similarly, the Elige Educar foundation in Chile conducted three rounds of teacher surveys between April–May 2020 and January–February 2021 and found that two in five teachers felt less emotionally supported by the management team than before, while half reported less work-life balance than before. Among the most frequent feelings reported by teachers were tiredness, worry and anxiety, with the level of burnout, as well as stress levels and workloads, considerably increasing between the first and third round of surveys (Walker, 2021).

Despite three rounds of the UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank survey of national responses to the pandemic, none of them asked about actions taken (or not taken) to address teachers' socioemotional well-being. Meanwhile, no regional survey has been conducted on the impact of the stressful situations and the sudden changes experienced by teachers during these two years, despite repeated warnings about their seriousness from various international organisations (OECD, 2021b). Instead, considerable attention has focused on the negative impact on students' socioemotional well-being and how teachers can contribute to addressing and mitigating this impact (UNICEF, 2020a). Nevertheless, there are a few national studies and other studies focused on teachers on a handful of countries. For example, in Chile, a survey was carried out by the Feminist Teachers' Network (REDOFEM) and the National Congress on the implications of the first year of the pandemic on teachers' health. The survey of more than 13,000 teachers focused on the question "What are the repercussions on the personal and working lives of teachers in Chile after a year of the pandemic?" (REDOFEM, 2021, p. 4). Among the many points noted, the survey emphasises the increase in unpaid work by teachers, particularly women, in line with previous studies (ECLAC, 2021d). The consequences of unpaid activities, in particular caregiving, are linked to high levels of work-related stress and a negative impact on overall socioemotional well-being as well as the development of physical health problems (REDOFEM, 2021). High levels of stress, exhaustion due to new tasks resulting from virtual learning modalities and feelings of a lack of institutional support are other frequently noted experiences of teachers surveyed in Peru (Miranda, Bazán and Nureña, 2021). Clearly, these consequences are not limited to teachers in Latin America (see UNESCO and others, 2021), and more research is needed to assess the short-, medium- and long-term consequences of the crisis on teachers' well-being, as well as to understand their needs and effectively address them.

As noted at the beginning of this section, socioemotional well-being and the integration of teaching practices that aim to develop skills such as empathy, the management and expression of emotions, and cooperation, among others, is fundamental for students' holistic development (UNICEF, 2021a). During these more than two years of health crisis, the impact of isolation and school closures as well as the direct impact on the health of the population has had significant consequences on the mental health and socioemotional well-being of all members of the educational community (OECD, 2021b; UNICEF, 2021a). However, national responses to address the mental health of students, teachers and caregivers have been sparse or unsatisfactory (UNESCO-OREALC, 2022). According to the ECLAC study conducted in the Caribbean in 2020 (Parker and Alfaro, 2021), data collected in five countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago) highlights the frustration expressed by parents and caregivers at the abrupt shift to non-classroom-based education that meant (in conjunction with changes in work circumstances) taking on the obligation to provide academic support and supervision for their children. In some households, this support was required for several children of different ages and with different needs. Some parents also faced job losses or had to adjust to working from home, which increased their stress levels.

The study by Parker and Alfaro (2021) also highlights the problems faced by teachers during the transition to an online system, as they lacked the technical skills, resources and support needed to adapt smoothly to the new modalities. Moreover, many teachers had to deal with the responsibilities of caring for and educating their own children during school closures, while also having to handle new work demands. In addition, in some countries, tensions arose between education ministries and teachers' unions over new work requirements along with concerns about the erosion of labour rights and inclusive approaches to decision-making. Finally, while all countries provided some degree of psychosocial support to different stakeholder groups (students, parents and teachers), the data collected by Parker and Alfaro (2021) show that the response was largely gradual and incremental and was characterised by a discretionary and individual approach in most countries, rather than an integrated and systemic strategy.

Given the isolation and socioemotional stress produced by the pandemic, recovery policies need to emphasise the development of socioemotional skills. Initiatives that encourage their development aim to facilitate cooperation and communication within the classroom not only as a way to facilitate learning, but also to channel and support the different socioemotional processes that students experience (Jones, Bouffard and Weissbourd, 2013). Such efforts also require solid institutional integration and coordination mechanisms that incorporate mental health and psychosocial support services as relevant components for the educational development of children, adolescents and youth in the recovery process. Finally, the crisis provides an opportunity to highlight the relevance of the development of social and emotional skills in teaching and learning processes, and to promote students' holistic development while reinforcing learning that was often interrupted during the crisis generated by the pandemic.

III. Financing and financial sustainability of education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean

Education is a fundamental human right that enables the attainment of other social, cultural and economic rights, and is a key asset for the achievement of the SDGs and the building of more equitable, inclusive and cohesive societies (Cetrángolo and Curcio, 2017). More specifically, investing in education means investing in the capacities of citizens who will contribute to a development path that can adequately respond to the complex social, economic and environmental challenges of the contemporary world; in this way, investing in education is investing in the prosperity of all.

However, despite its importance at the personal and collective level, equitable access to quality education is not a widespread reality in the different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, nor has it been among the priority actions in the pandemic recovery plans (UNESCO-OREALC and UNICEF, 2022). This section highlights the importance of placing education at the heart of the regional public agenda, as greater investment in education focused on leaving no one behind is key to moving towards a transformative recovery of Latin American and Caribbean economies and societies.

Although the region has prioritised spending on education in recent decades, Latin America and the Caribbean were already facing difficulties in achieving the targets set out in SDG 4 by 2030 before the COVID-19 outbreak (Gajardo, 2020; UNESCO, 2017); these difficulties will be exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. After the pandemic, increased educational investment is required to fund learning recovery measures, strategies to mitigate the potential increase in dropout rates (and to provide educational alternatives for those students who will not return to school), and to pay for new expenditures focused on improving school infrastructure and facilities to meet health protocols (UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, due to the economic crisis and lower household income, the pandemic could mean an increase in student migration from the private to the public sector, which would also increase the need for more investment in infrastructure and facilities.[25]

[25] The potential increase in public education enrolment is a hypothesis that will have to be tested in the medium term, considering the different national and subnational contexts. There is an opposing hypothesis that points to an increase in the privatisation of education due to the effects of the pandemic. This hypothesis suggests that new privatisation may be taking place because, in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, privately managed schools have had greater autonomy to resume face-to-face classes (UNESCO-OREALC, UNICEF and ECLAC, 2022).

Because the cost of the pandemic is higher the longer is school closure —since learning losses and the risk of school dropout are directly related to the length of school closure periods (UNESCO, 2020)— the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean likely find themselves in a particularly complex situation to meet the proposed 2030 targets. Moreover, even as education needs are rising, the economic crisis associated with the pandemic is also imposing new hurdles to education financing, given fiscal contractions and new requirements and demands in other public policy sectors.

However, that said, it is now more important than ever that education financing is prioritised in the region's recovery efforts. Not only is it urgent to tackle historical deficits in the fulfilment of the right to quality education and address the new requirements associated with the deepening inequalities in education systems following the pandemic, but it is also now crucial that we prepare our societies for the complex local and global challenges humanity is facing, including accelerated technological change, the climate crisis and demographic pressures.

A. Latin America and the Caribbean face an education financing crisis

Governments provide most education financing. Before the pandemic, it is estimated that, globally, governments financed 79% of total education spending, while households financed 20%. The remaining 1% is made up through donor contributions, which account for 12% of total education spending in low-income countries and 2% in lower-middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2018b).[26] Public resources for the education sector may come from the budget of the central government (also called the national government), intermediate governments (provinces or states, if they exist) and local or municipal governments. The structure of education system financing within each country is related to the institutional and administrative organisation of governments and their education systems, as well as the fiscal resources available and the participation of private education in providing education.[27]

The public education spending data presented in this chapter correspond mainly to those collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO UIS) and cover the general or total government level.[28] Furthermore, although the institutional coverage of the data and the classification methodology are different, in some cases —in particular when analysing the goals of the Incheon Declaration and the SDG 4 Framework for Action and when considering the prioritisation of education spending within public social spending— the analysis is complemented with spending data at the central government level collected by ECLAC following a functional classification.

[26] For the 2012–2014 period, Haiti was the only country in the region considered low income, while the Plurinational State of Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay were considered lower middle income. For the same period, the countries in the upper-middle-income classification are Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, while Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay are in the high-income classification (Rivas, 2021).

[27] Education can be provided through state-run institutions (or public institutions) or privately run institutions (which include for-profit and non-profit institutions).

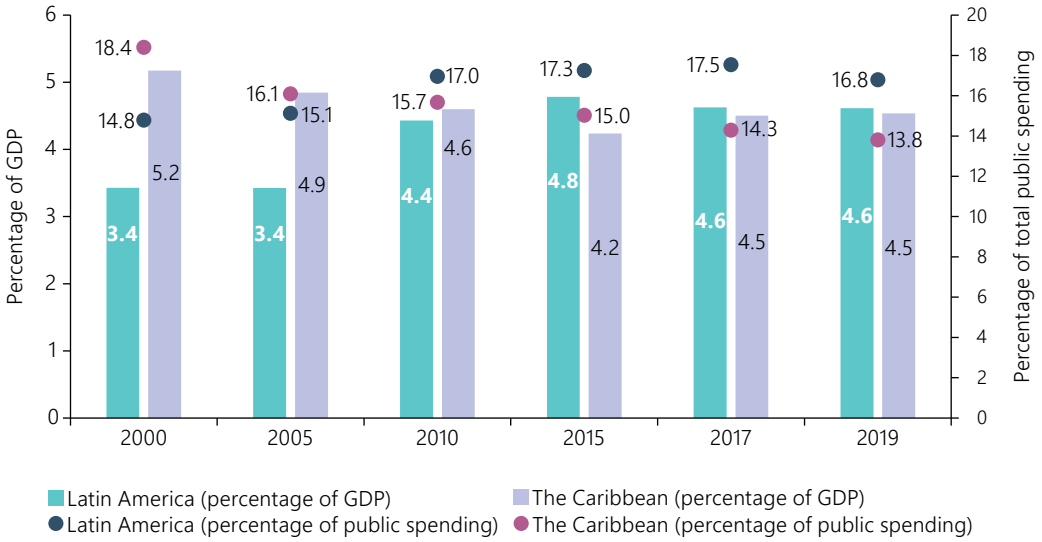
[28] Education spending reported by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO UIS) can come from all government ministries and agencies that fund or support education programmes in the country, where education spending is understood as expenditure on basic educational goods and services, such as teaching staff, school buildings or textbooks and teaching materials, and peripheral educational goods and services, such as ancillary services, general administration and other activities. Data on public education spending from UNESCO UIS come from official country information available in budgets and financial reports prepared by ministries of finance or education, and in financial reports issued by public primary and secondary schools and higher education institutions, among other administrative documents (such as teachers' payrolls) (UNESCO UIS, 2009).

1. Despite efforts to expand public spending on education in recent decades, signs of stagnation were already present before the pandemic

From mid-2000 to mid-2010, educational investment in Latin America experienced a period of strong growth, partly due to the economic boom of that period and the extension of compulsory secondary education in most countries (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). Figure 23 presents data for 13 Latin American countries and shows that, on average, in 2005 these countries spent about 3.4% of their GDP on education spending, while 10 years later, this figure averaged 4.2%. Moreover, between 2000 and 2017, education spending as a percentage of total public spending increased, on average, by more than 2 percentage points in the countries analysed, jumping from 14.8% in 2000 to 17.1% in 2017. However, signs of a slowdown are evident from the early 2010s, , and this trend became more pronounced in the second five-year period: between 2010 and 2015, educational investment as a percentage of total public spending began to stagnate, and by 2019 both indicators —public spending on education as a percentage of GDP and public spending on education as a percentage of total public spending— were lower than in 2015 (see figure 23).

Figure 23
Latin America (13) and the Caribbean (9): public spending on education (general government) as a percentage of GDP and as a percentage of total public spending[a b], 2000–2020

(Percentages)



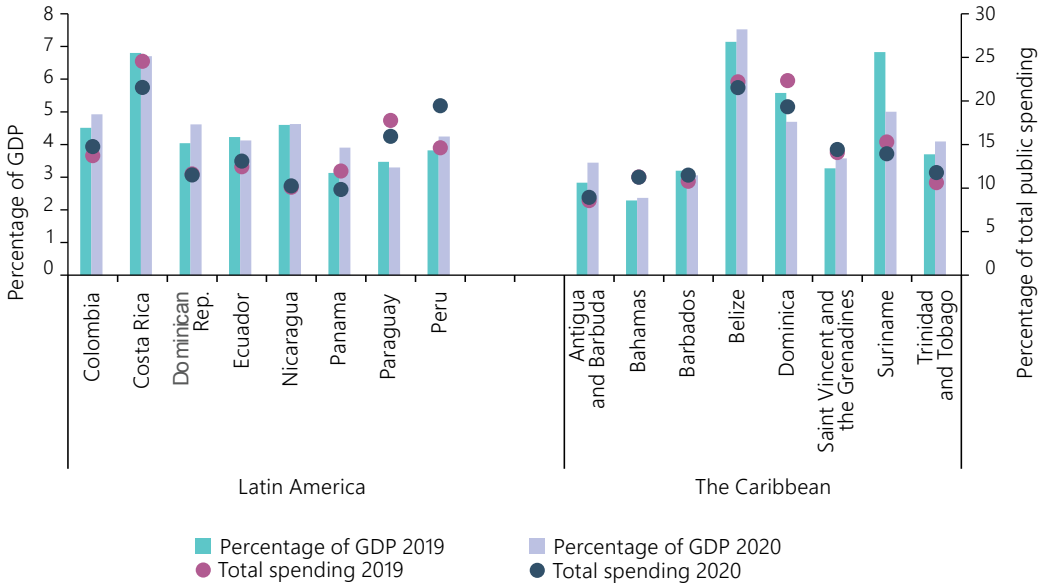
Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of data available from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO UIS).
[a] The subregional percentages correspond to the simple average of the corresponding national percentages. The 13 Latin American countries are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. The nine Caribbean countries are Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago.
[b] Regarding imputed values: in Latin America, in 2019, data from 2018 were used for Brazil, Chile and Mexico; in 2005, the value for Costa Rica was from 2006, those for Panama and Paraguay from 2004, and the values for Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic from 2003 (imputations were made for both indicators). In addition, for public spending on education as a percentage of GDP, the 2010 value for Uruguay was imputed using the 2011 figure. Meanwhile, in the Caribbean, 2005 values are imputed for Belize, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago: for Belize, 2004 data are used, for Saint Kitts and Nevis, 2007 data, and for Trinidad and Tobago 2003 data; additionally, in Trinidad and Tobago, 2011 values are used for 2010 (all imputations are made for both indicators). In Guyana and Santa Lucia, 2018 values are used for 2019, in addition to 2016 data for 2015 for both indicators.

While the trend in education financing in Caribbean countries is different from that of Latin American countries, on average, the nine Caribbean countries in figure 23 also show signs of stagnation and slowdown in the second half of the past decade. According to available data, at the beginning of 2000, Caribbean countries were spending, on average, 5.2% of GDP on education, a figure that showed a negative trend throughout the decade, reaching 4.4% in 2015, before stagnating around that figure. Moreover, available data show that over the last two decades, Caribbean countries have significantly decreased the prioritisation of education spending within total public spending: while in 2000, on average, countries spent more than 18% of public spending on education, in 2019 they spent less than 15% (see figure 23).

2. On average, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean meet the minimum standards agreed in the Incheon Declaration and the Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4, but there are significant disparities between countries

The Incheon Declaration and the Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4 recognise the important role of education as a key driver of development and for the achievement of the other SDGs by 2030. The declaration calls on governments to allocate at least 4% to 6% of GDP or at least 15% to 20% of total public spending to the education sector (UNESCO and others, 2015). Although on average countries in both subregions met at least one of the criteria before the pandemic (as figure 23 shows), there are significant disparities in the particular situations of each country. For example, figure 24 shows that in 2019 at least two countries in Latin America (Panama and Peru) and five countries in the Caribbean (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago) did not meet the Incheon Declaration's education financing goals for either indicator, while five of the countries analysed met only one criterion (all were Latin American countries: Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Paraguay) and only four countries (Costa Rica in Latin America and Belize, Dominica and Suriname in the Caribbean) had already met both.

Figure 24
Latin America (8 countries) and the Caribbean (8 countries): public spending on education (general government) as a percentage of GDP and as a percentage of total public spending[a b], 2019 and 2020
(Percentages)

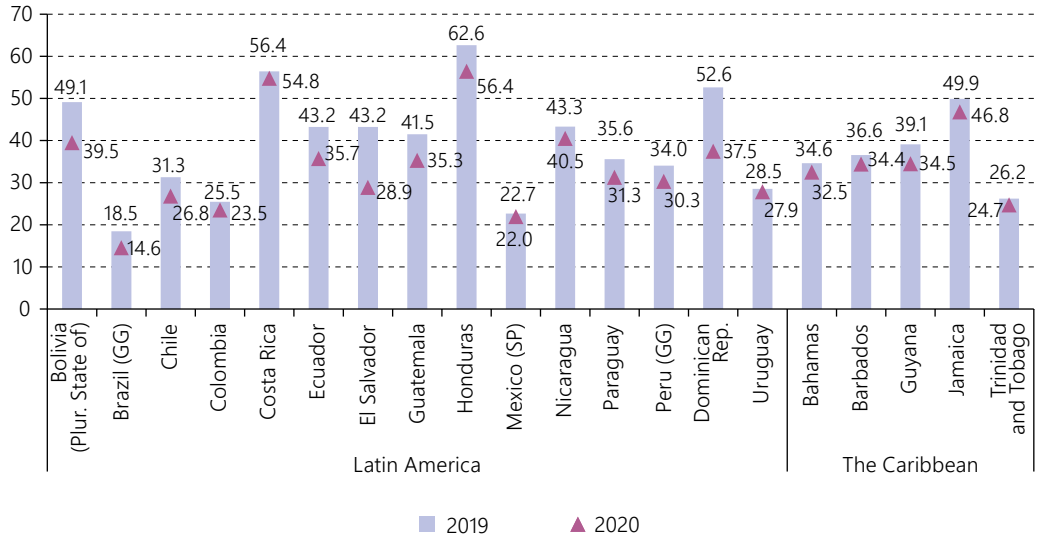


Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.

Figure 24 also shows disparities in the education financing trend across countries when comparing the situation in 2019 with that of the first year of the pandemic: while in at least four countries in the region (Costa Rica, Paraguay, Dominica and Suriname) both financing indicators fall when comparing 2019 and 2020 figures, the available data show that Colombia, Peru, Antigua and Barbuda, and Trinidad and Tobago increased their education financing efforts and both indicators rose in the first year of the pandemic. The case of Peru stands out: in 2019, the country did not meet either of the two funding targets set out in the Incheon Declaration, but in 2020, according to the data available from the UNESCO UIS, it met both.

Finally, figure 25 shows how the region's countries prioritise education spending within social spending. As mentioned previously, the analysis of this indicator uses expenditure data collected by ECLAC (available from CEPALSTAT) and which are given a functional classification –i.e., they consider within public education spending all fiscal resources allocated to the financing of education policies, even when these are not necessarily allocated to the education heading in fiscal budgets. More specifically, functional education spending includes all expenditure on education, from pre-primary to tertiary, including ancillary services and research and development expenditure. Furthermore, it is important to note that, in general, the ECLAC data have a more restricted institutional coverage of spending than the UNESCO UIS data, as spending information is usually only available at the central government level for most countries in the region and not at the general or total government level. In addition, it should be noted that figure 25 includes data with expanded coverage for Brazil and Mexico, as both are federal countries and data at the central or national government level would significantly underestimate the total fiscal commitment of both countries.[29]

Figure 25
Latin America (15 countries) and the Caribbean (5 countries): prioritisation of public education spending within public social spending (central government) by country[a], 2019 and 2020
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), based on official data from the countries. Data available from CEPALSTAT.
[a] The coverage of the Plurinational State of Bolivia corresponds to central government, that of Brazil and Peru corresponds to general government, and that of Mexico refers to the non-financial public sector.

[29] At the time of writing, education spending data for Argentina were not available with expanded coverage for 2019 and 2020. Since Argentina is a federal country, it was decided not to publish its spending data at the central government level.

Although both the final prioritisation and the extent of the drop fluctuate significantly, figure 25 shows that, in the first year of the pandemic, all countries in the region for which data is available decreased the prioritisation of education spending within social spending compared to 2019. Costa Rica and Honduras stand out in Latin America, as does Jamaica in the Caribbean, for the high priority they give to education in social spending (55%, 56% and 47%, respectively), almost double the priority given by Chile (particularly in 2020), Uruguay and Trinidad and Tobago, and more than triple the priority given by Brazil in 2020. The extent of the drop in the prioritisation of education spending within social spending in El Salvador and the Dominican Republic is especially striking and is partly explained by a strong increase in the prioritisation of social protection spending in both countries to the detriment of education.

Despite the drop in the prioritisation of education spending within social spending and the adverse economic scenario, in a survey of education ministries more than 40% of Latin American and Caribbean countries reported a budget increase for public education spending in 2021, while only 10% reported cuts (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). According to the survey data, most of the additional spending was for recurrent costs, such as school meals, cash transfers or other student support (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). Additionally, when making decisions on the reallocation of funds, the number of students (48%) and socioeconomic characteristics (48%) were prioritised, followed by geographic criteria (29%) and the presence of students with disabilities (24%) (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022). The survey also notes the financial contribution of external donors, present in 54% of the countries in the region, which were in most cases complementary to additional allocations by governments (58%) (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF, 2022).[30]

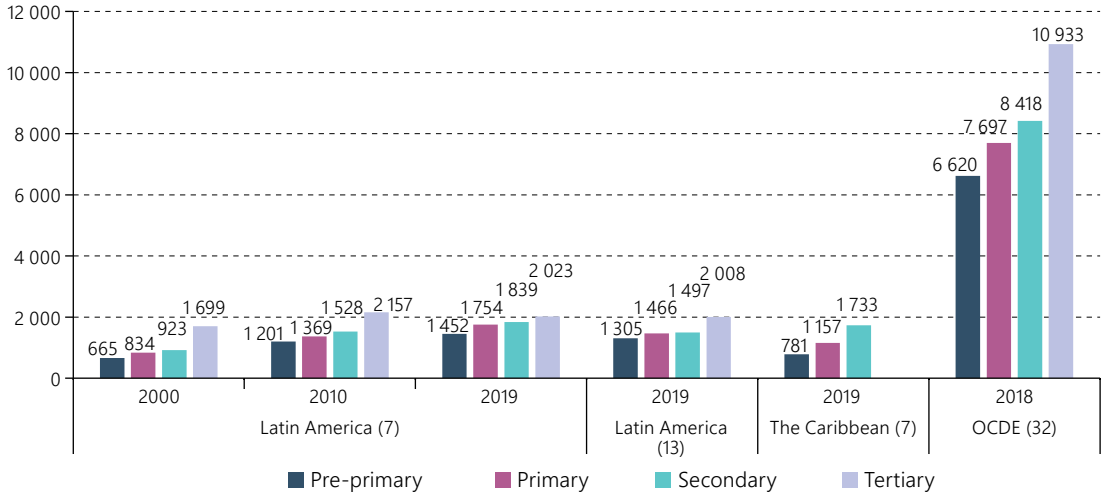
3. Public spending on education per student in the countries of the region remains very low

Despite progress in educational investment in the region in recent decades, public spending per student remains very low compared to the level of investment in OECD countries. For example, according to 2019 data available from UNESCO UIS, while Latin American and Caribbean countries invested on average US$ 1,754 and US$ 1,157 per student in primary education (in constant dollars), respectively, public spending per student in OECD countries at the same education level was more than four times the average investment in Latin American countries and almost seven times the investment made by Caribbean countries (see figure 26). As such, the minimums agreed in the Incheon Declaration and the Framework for Action for the achievement of SDG 4 are a rather limited benchmark for the countries of the region, especially considering that the disparities in education coverage, quality, equity and inclusion are still very significant, and that these are at risk of rising after the pandemic and the subsequent economic contraction (Rivas, 2021).

The data presented in figure 26 show that (i) on average, in Latin American, Caribbean and OECD countries, the amount of investment per student increases as the education level rises; (ii) investment per student is higher in Latin America than in the Caribbean when comparing education levels, except for secondary education (where the average investment per student in the 7 Caribbean countries is more than 15% higher than the average investment per student in the 13 Latin American countries for which data is available); and (iii) the absolute gap in public investment per student between each subregion and the OECD increases as the education level rises.

[30] The above financial data were collected through the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank-OECD Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 during the first quarter of 2021. The questionnaire was designed to be answered by education ministry officials in charge of school education (pre-primary to upper secondary). Broadly speaking, with regards to financing, the questions dealt with the following issues: Have countries planned increases/decreases in the public education budget for the current or next financial year? Have they changed the way they allocate resources as a result of the pandemic? How were additional resources provided to educational institutions during school closures?

Figure 26
Latin America (7 countries in the series, 13 countries in 2019), the Caribbean (7 countries) and OECD (32 countries): public spending on education (general government) by education level[a], 2000, 2010, 2018 and 2019
(In constant dollars per enrolment)

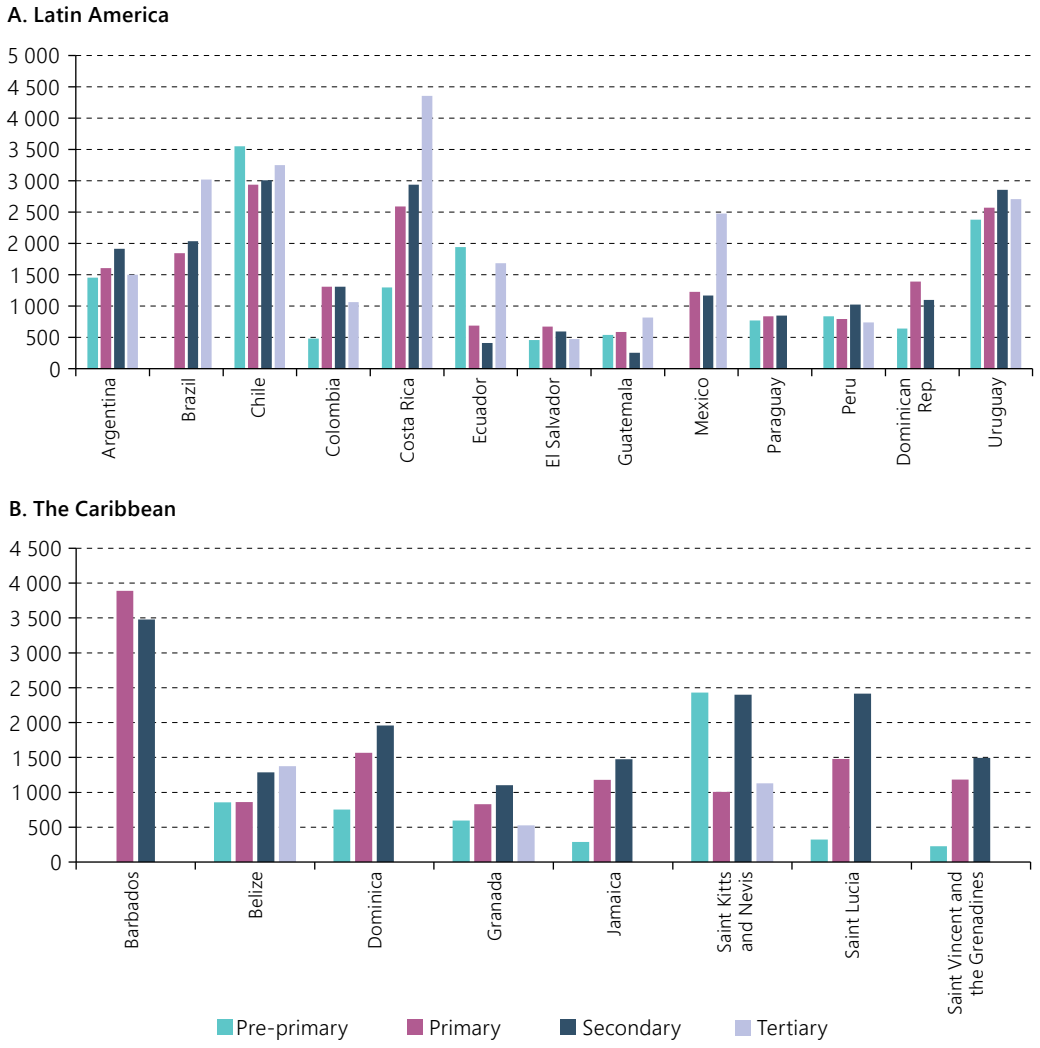


Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.
[a] The Latin American and OECD average is a simple average. The base year of the constant dollar value is 2018 (three years before the update in September 2021). The seven Latin American countries with data available for 2000, 2010 and 2019 are: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay. For the 2000 series, the data for Costa Rica correspond to 2004, and for the 2010 series, the data for Costa Rica correspond to 2011 and those for Uruguay to 2011. The 13 Latin American countries with data available for 2019 only are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. Pre-primary does not include data from Brazil or Mexico, and tertiary does not include data from the Dominican Republic or Paraguay. The seven Caribbean countries with data for 2019 are: Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The OECD countries with data available for 2018 are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea (Rep. of), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and United Kingdom. For the 2018–2019 series, the data for Chile correspond to 2018, Grenada to 2017, and Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 2015.

However, it is again important to note that the subregional averages conceal important differences between countries. Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay stand out in Latin America, as does Barbados in the Caribbean, as having the highest public spending per student, while El Salvador and Guatemala have the lowest levels. The gap between the two extremes is considerable: for example, Chile spends more than US$ 3,000 per student on secondary education, which is more than five times the per capita investment of El Salvador at this level, and about 12 times that of Guatemala (see figures 27A and B).

Overall, in Latin America the per capita amount that each country invests in primary education is relatively similar to what it invests per student in secondary education. Generally, the most striking differences between countries are found when comparing the relative priority assigned to pre-primary and tertiary education. For example, comparing the relative importance given to pre-primary education in relation to the priority given to other levels (in terms of the amount spent per student enrolled), Chile and Ecuador rank highest in Latin America, while Colombia, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic rank lowest. These differences in the distribution of public spending by education level among countries, which is also seen in the Caribbean, may be related to the share of private enrolment and educational coverage at each level, variables that undoubtedly fluctuate more at the pre-primary and tertiary levels (Cetrángolo and Curcio, 2017; UNESCO-OREALC, UNICEF and ECLAC, 2022). Finally, the data in figure 27 (A and B) show the heterogeneity within the region regarding the amount of educational investment per student enrolled. Costa Rica and Chile are among the countries that invest the most in education in Latin America and the Caribbean (controlling for the number of students per level). However, both are at the bottom of the OECD group of countries when comparing investment by this indicator.

Figure 27
Latin America (13 countries) and the Caribbean (8 countries): public expenditure on education (general government) by level of education, around 2019[a]
(In constant dollars per enrolment)



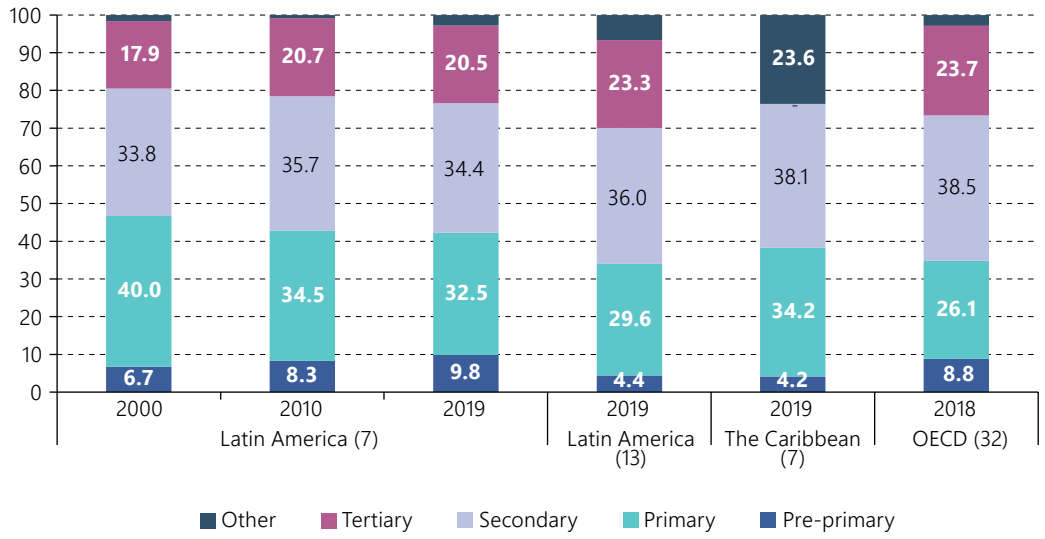
Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.
[a] The base year is 2018. The data for Chile correspond to 2018, those for Grenada to 2020, for Peru to 2017, for Paraguay to 2020, and Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 2015. Per capita investment figures are not shown when data is not available for that level in the UNESCO UIS database.

Regarding the distribution of total spending among educational levels, on average, Latin American and Caribbean countries invest most of their resources at the primary and secondary levels. According to the data shown in figure 28, on average, Latin American countries were investing 30% of their education spending on primary and 36% on secondary education in 2019, while these percentages were 34% and 38%, respectively, for Caribbean countries with available information.[31] The data available from UNESCO UIS also allow for an analysis of the average trend in spending per education level in seven Latin American countries since 2000. More specifically, figure 28 shows that the average weight of the pre-primary level in total public spending on education increased consistently to a difference of 3 percentage points

[31] In both subregions, the tertiary level is the third most important in terms of the allocation of educational investment, receiving —on average— 23% of education spending in Latin American countries and 24% in Caribbean countries (according to data available from UNESCO UIS).

between 2000 and 2019. These seven countries also show an increase in the average weight of the tertiary level in total public investment in education. However, this increase mainly occurred between 2000 and 2010; thereafter, the data suggest stagnating growth in prioritisation. While the primary and secondary education levels remain the most significant in terms of their relative weight, both have experienced a drop in their prioritisation over the last two decades when considering the simple average of the breakdown of education spending of the seven countries that have the data for this analysis.

Figure 28
Latin America (7 countries in the series, 13 countries in 2019) and OECD (32 countries): breakdown of public spending on education (general government) by education level[a], 2000, 2010, 2018 and 2019
(Percentage of the total)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.
[a] The Latin American, Caribbean and OECD averages are simple averages. The "Other" category is estimated based on data availability (i.e., subtracting spending reported for pre-primary to tertiary levels from total education spending) and, in general, represents spending on non-tertiary post-secondary education (vocational or not) and other spending not specified by education level. Regarding the Caribbean, the "Other" category could possibly include spending on tertiary education, as there is no reported spending at this level in the seven countries included in the graph. The seven Latin American countries in the series are: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay. For the 2010 series, the data for Uruguay corresponds to 2011. The 13 Latin American countries with data for 2019 are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. The pre-primary data exclude Brazil and Mexico, and tertiary data exclude the Dominican Republic and Paraguay. The seven Caribbean countries with data for 2019 are: Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The 32 OECD countries with data for 2018 are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea (Rep. of), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and United Kingdom. For the 2018–2019 series, the data for Chile correspond to 2018, those for Grenada to 2017, and those for Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 2015.

While there is no consensus on how resources should be distributed by education level, the data suggest that investment at earlier ages may be more cost-effective, as prioritising funding at an early age has persistent effects in later life and may increase the return on later educational investments (Berlinski and Schady, 2015; Cunha and Heckman, 2007). However, it is also true that the return on these investments can be diminished if the country does not have education systems that meet the basic conditions necessary for children and adolescents to learn the skills they will need throughout their lives. Accordingly, investment in early childhood and pre-primary educational development is complementary to educational investment at higher levels and is particularly important in countries with structural problems and deficits in their education systems, which is the case for the countries in the region (Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018).

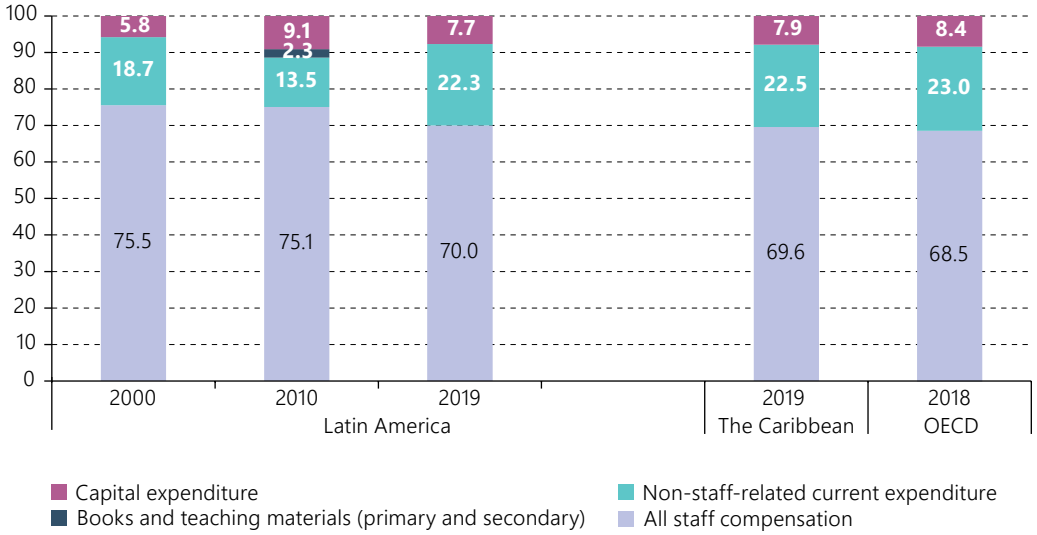
Considering the greater challenges in terms of quality and coverage that the region faces compared to countries with more consolidated education systems, it is possible to conclude that education financing in Latin America and the Caribbean is insufficient. The region needs to invest more resources in the development of knowledge and skills in its children, adolescents and youth, as the education of the new generations is at the heart of the reforms that will enable the leap in development that will ensure greater prosperity for all.

B. How funds are invested is as important as how much is invested

1. The majority of educational resources are concentrated in current expenditure

When analysing education financing, it is important to consider not only the level of investment but also the way in which resources are used. In addition to the breakdown of public spending across the different education levels, an important aspect of spending is how it is classified by purpose. Figure 29 shows that most public education financing in both Latin America and the Caribbean is concentrated in current expenditure, especially staff compensation (which includes salaries and other financial benefits such as insurance and retirement plans). In 2019 in both subregions, staff compensation accounted, on average, for 70% of total education spending in the different countries, while 22% to 23% went to recurrent non-staff-related expenditure and about 8% to capital expenditure. These percentages did not differ substantially from the OECD average, although a more detailed comparison should consider the difference in salaries between the two groups of countries, as well as the different uses of technology in educational processes (which influence teaching efficiency, among other things).

Figure 29
Latin America (8 countries), the Caribbean (4 countries) and OECD (30 countries): breakdown by type of public spending on education[a] (general government)
(As a percentage of total spending on public institutions)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.
[a] Simple average of Latin America, the Caribbean and OECD countries. Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. Caribbean countries: Barbados, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia. OECD countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea (Rep. of), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom. For the 2010 series, the data for Uruguay correspond to 2011. For the 2018–2019 series, the data for Chile correspond to 2018, for Denmark and Grenada to 2017, for Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 2015.

UNESCO-OREALC, UNICEF and ECLAC (2022) analyse the evolution of expenditure components over the last decade in the region and show that, on average, during the first five years there was an increase of nearly 2 percentage points in capital expenditure at all levels of education. However, since 2015, the percentage of funding allocated to capital expenditure has fallen by a much larger share at all education levels and, in most cases, the values for 2018 and 2019 are the lowest of the decade. Furthermore, over the entire period from 2010 to 2020, the share of education financing allocated to capital expenditure in public tertiary education institutions exceeded, on average, the share invested at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels, which is also the case for the share allocated to current expenditure other than staff compensation.

2. Education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean suffer from major problems of efficiency and equity

Efficiency refers to the ability to achieve more goals with the same or fewer resources. The concept can be broken down into technical efficiency, which refers to making the best use of available resources, and allocative efficiency, i.e., allocating resources to the expenditure items with the highest rates of return (Bessent and Bessent, 1980; Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018). A study that analysed the efficiency of education spending in 66 countries (of which nine were in Latin America and the Caribbean) using PISA 2015 data[32] concluded that the least efficient countries tend to be in Latin America, Western Asia, Africa and South-Eastern Europe. According to the results of this analysis, 90% of schools in Latin America and the Caribbean are below the efficiency threshold and could improve their educational outcomes by reallocating their inputs. In contrast, in countries with highly efficient education systems, such as Vietnam, Japan and Estonia, this percentage is much lower (32%, 52% and 70%, respectively), as is the degree of improvement they could achieve by reallocating their resources[33] (Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018).

While tackling inefficiencies in the use of educational resources, the region also needs to address the challenges related to their equitable allocation, since education is a human right that must be guaranteed for all, under conditions of equal opportunities (UNESCO/UNICEF, 2007). Moreover, the data show that efficiency and equity in the use of educational resources go hand in hand, as school systems with more efficient spending also tend to have more equitable spending (Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018).

Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most unequal regions in the world and must work to address the structural causes of its inequality, including inequitable access to quality educational opportunities. Accordingly, educational financing must be based on criteria of horizontal and vertical equity, that is, it must ensure equal treatment of students in similar conditions, as well as direct greater resources towards students from more vulnerable contexts who have greater needs and require more support. The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic not only made existing asymmetries and inequalities more evident but has also deepened them, and policies that promote a more equitable allocation of educational resources, benefiting students in the most vulnerable situations, are urgently needed.

3. It is important to develop the technical and governance capacities of the different State actors involved in education

To connect educational resources and policies with efforts to achieve greater levels of equity, efficiency and quality, countries in the region need to develop State capacities for strategic planning and management of educational resources. States must have the capacities to set and maintain priorities, innovate when

[32] In addition to each country's assessment results, the study considered three indicators to measure the level of school efficiency: teacher/student ratio, the number of computers per student and student socioeconomic status (to control for students' backgrounds) (Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018).

[33] On average, the study finds that Latin American and Caribbean countries could improve their educational efficiency levels by 17% by reallocating their resources without increasing them, while this percentage would be just 5%, 9% and 6% in Vietnam, Japan and Estonia, respectively (Izquierdo, Pessino and Vuletin, 2018).

actions or strategies have failed, coordinate conflicting objectives in a coherent manner and ensure policy stability over time to deliver results (Rivas, 2021; UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022; Weaver and Rockman, 2015). Indeed, the ability to establish long-term education strategies by making education a policy priority is a feature of education systems that have successfully improved their educational and learning achievements in a sustainable way (Rivas and others, 2020), which becomes highly relevant in the regional context, which is strongly characterised by significant policy changes (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).

Other common features of systems that have achieved lasting improvements in educational attainments include the creation of opportunities for dialogue and participation with students and teachers, the setting of clear and measurable objectives that provide insights for decision-making, and the building of trust and legitimacy of education policies, emphasising accountability mechanisms and promoting continuous training and meritocracy in selecting teachers and government officials (Ehren and Baxter, 2021; Rivas and others, 2020; UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). In short, to achieve comprehensive improvements in the region's education systems, it is crucial to build technical and political (government) capacities among State actors to make efficient use of resources and generate the trust and legitimacy required to achieve broad, long-term educational pacts among the different actors in the education community, which identify, consolidate and build on common interests and motivations, and ensure educational financing over time (Tedesco, 2005).

The need for and importance of producing common agreements and standards in education systems is especially vital in the current context, which is characterised by multiple actors, both State and non-State (UNESCO, 2021b). As the 2021 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report highlights, in recent years the region's education systems have been increasingly characterised by the presence of non-State actors in the provision, governance, regulation and financing of education. This is a trend that, if the necessary coordination, regulation and supervision measures are not implemented, could lead to the deepening of inequalities as well as the development of new ones (see box 8). In this regard, it is important for governments to see all educational institutions and all students and teachers as part of a single system to address disparities in educational processes and attainment and efficiency challenges in education spending (UNESCO, 2021b).

Box 8
The privatisation and (de)centralisation of education systems in the region

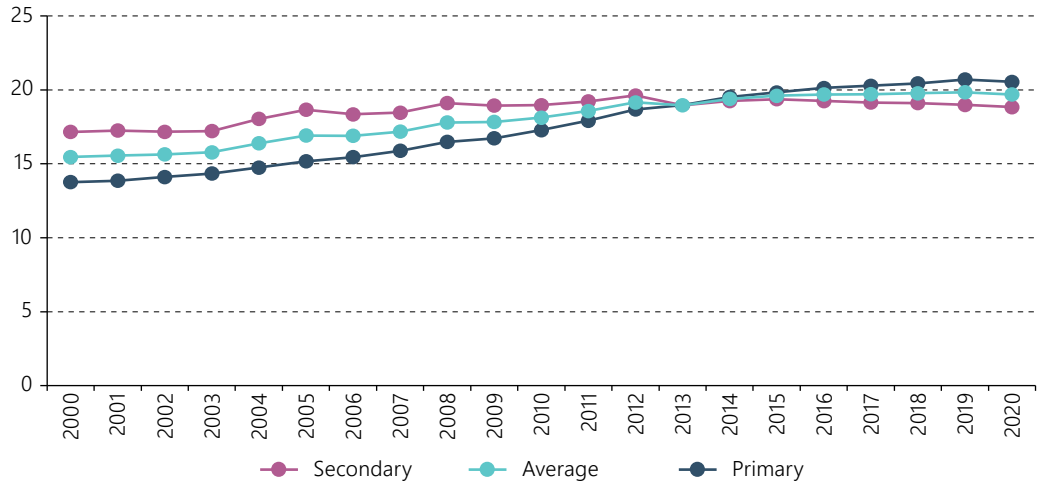
The high degree of heterogeneity among education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean is partly explained by two phenomena that have contributed to the diversification and segmentation of the education offering. The first phenomenon refers to the privatisation of schools, a trend that has grown significantly in recent decades in the region (UNESCO 2022), while the second is related to the processes of decentralisation and recentralisation that have redefined the control that the State has over national education systems. If the proliferation of these new private and public actors is combined with inadequate coordination, regulation and oversight, certain patterns of inequality could be reinforced, resulting in significant challenges (Murillo, Martínez-Garrido and Graña, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

A. Privatisation of school enrolment

Following the typology of Verger, Moschetti and Fontdevila (2017), education privatisation in the region can be explained by two trends. The first is the redefinition of the State's role in education from being a provider to a mainly regulatory body (which is partly the case in Chile and Brazil); the second is the lack of public investment and rapid population growth that has stimulated the emergence of private schools to cover the State deficit (which has happened in Peru, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica) (Verger, Moschetti and Fontdevila, 2017).

A combination of factors has led the private education system to play an increasingly important role in the region. For example, in 2000 around 15.5% of students nationally attended a private school; by 2020, this figure had risen to almost 20%. In other words, the share of private schools in primary and secondary enrolment increased by 29% on average at the national level, an increase strongly driven by increased privatisation in primary education.

Figure 1
Latin America and the Caribbean: share of primary and secondary education enrolment in private institutions[a], 2000–2020
(Percentage of total enrolment)

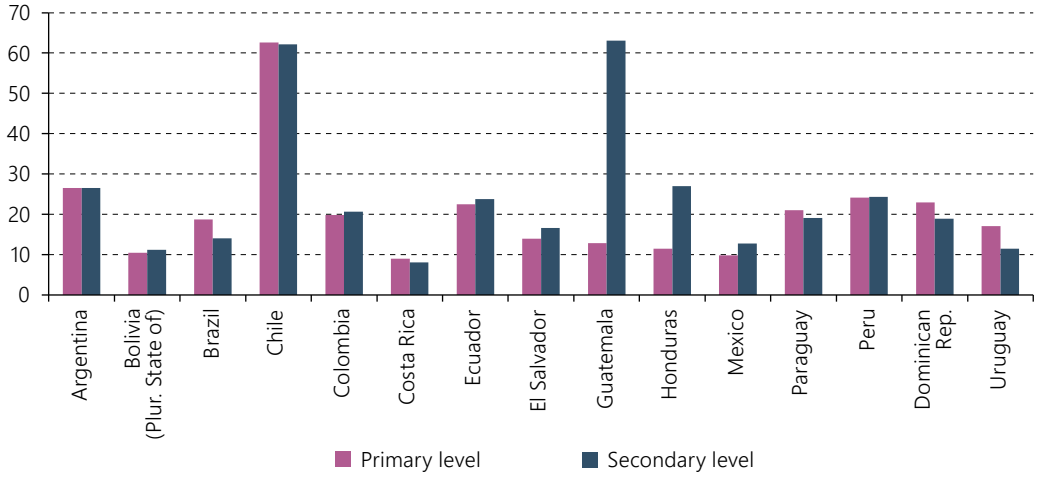


Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data.
[a] Simple average of private enrolment across countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

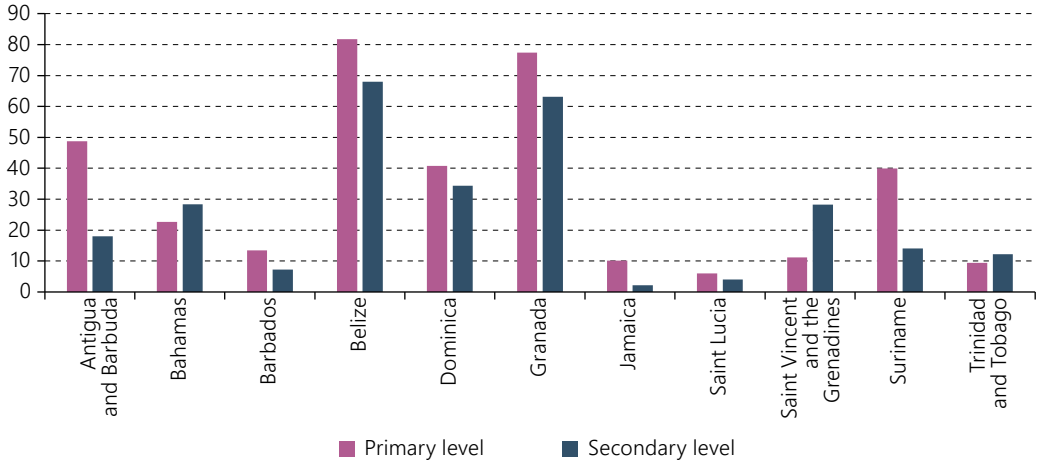
While the figure illustrates a regional trend, there are important differences between the two subregions and between countries. As the following figures show, the privatisation of student enrolment varies across countries in the region. Grenada has the highest proportion of private enrolment at almost 70%, followed by Chile at 62%. At the other extreme are the Caribbean countries of Saint Lucia and Jamaica at 5% and 6%, respectively. The figure for Costa Rica is also especially low at 8%.

Figure 2
Latin America (14 countries) and the Caribbean (12 countries): share of primary and secondary education enrolment in private institutions, around 2020[a]
(Percentage of total enrolment)

A. Latin America



B. The Caribbean



Source: Prepared by the authors based on UNESCO UIS data. [Online] http://data.uis.unesco.org/.
[a] The corresponding years are indicated after the countries. In Latin America, the countries are: Argentina (2019), Bolivia (Plurinational State of) (2020), Brazil (2019), Chile (2019), Colombia (2020), Costa Rica (2020), Ecuador (2020), El Salvador (2020), Guatemala (2020), Honduras (2020), Mexico (2019), Paraguay (2020), Peru (2020) and Uruguay. In the Caribbean, the countries are Antigua and Barbuda (2018), Bahamas (2018), Barbados (2020), Belize (2020), Dominica (2020), Dominican Republic (2020), Grenada (2018), Jamaica (2020), Saint Lucia (2020), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (2018), Suriname (2020) and Trinidad and Tobago (2020).

B. The centralisation of educational governance

The 1990s were characterised by a strong trend towards the decentralisation of education systems, especially in federal and highly populated countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Colombia as well as in countries such as Chile with the so-called "municipalisation of education". In all these cases, there was a clear delegation of educational administration and management responsibilities to subnational levels of government such as municipalities or communes (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). These decentralisation processes were underpinned by the search for greater efficiency in public spending and accountability towards entities with greater scrutiny. However, decentralisation generated significant coordination challenges, as well as greater inequality in resources and in students' educational performance, leading to systemic fragmentation (Bellei and others, 2019).

In response to these limitations, a new trend of recentralisation of education systems emerged from 2000 onwards, especially in the countries mentioned above. This did not mean school management was transferred back to the central government, but rather resulted in "reinforced regulation, financing, and incentive policies" (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022, p. 216). During this period, several countries created regulatory agencies and institutions with greater autonomy to coordinate and monitor. It was at this time, for example, that Peru created its Regional Coordination Office and Chile moved forward with its new Superintendence of Education.

Because of the growing disparities among education systems in the region due to the privatisation and recentralisation trends and the emergence of new private and public actors, States are now having to strengthen their coordination, regulatory and supervisory role. In this context, it is important to promote institutionalised channels of dialogue between the different actors in the education system (Rivas and others, 2020), as well as to implement actions to identify and remedy instances of inequality. These conclusions echo the findings of the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO), whose analysis calls on central governments to manage school system governance as a single multi-stakeholder system. Doing so would not only address differences in educational processes and attainments, but also in educational financing.

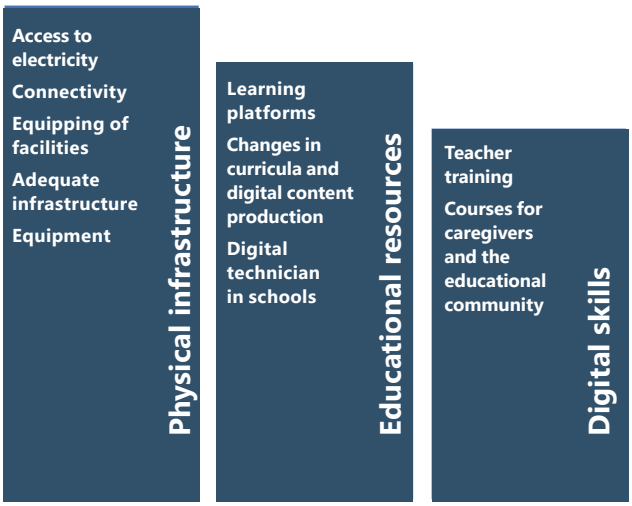
Source: A. Rivas and others (2020), Las llaves de la educación: estudio comparado sobre la mejora de los sistemas educativos subnacionales en América Latina. CIAESA, Instituto Natura and Universidad de San Andrés. [Online] https://www.institutonatura.org/hispana/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Las_llaves_de_la_educacion-v3_DEF.pdf; C. Bellei and others (2019), The Production of Socio-economic Segregation in Chilean Education: School Choice, Social Class and Market Dynamics. Understanding School Segregation. [Online] https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350033542.ch-011; K. Eaton (2004), Politics Beyond the Capital. Stanford University Press; IIPE-UNESCO (2021), Desigualdades educativas en América Latina: tendencias, políticas y desafíos. Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (CLADE) and OXFAM. [Online] https://redclade.org/wp-content/uploads/CLADE_AmerLatina_Educ-y-Desiguald_v4.pdf; J. López and D. Parra (2016), Privatización de la provisión educativa en Chile: caracterización de los proveedores educativos de una comuna popular urbana. Educación Social. [Online] https://www.scielo.br/j/es/a/BCvDKyVzKqMQPKMZTSd6pvt/?format=pdf&lang=es; Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina (2020), Evaluación Nacional del Proceso de Continuidad Pedagógica: Informes Preliminares de la Encuesta a Equipos Directivos y Hogares. [Online] https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/resumen_de_datos_informes_preliminares_directivos_y_hogares_0.pdf; J. Murillo, C. Martínez-Garrido and R. Graña (2020), Escuelas públicas para pobres, escuelas privadas para ricos: relación entre educación privada y segregación escolar de carácter socio-económico en América Latina. RUNAE. [Online] https://revistas.unae.edu.ec/index.php/runae/article/view/426/461; UNESCO (2021), Global education monitoring report, 2021/2: non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses? Global Education Monitoring Report Team. [Online] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379875; UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC (2022), Informe regional de monitoreo ODS4 – Educación 2030 2015–2021; A. Verger, Moschetti and C. Fontdevila (2017), La privatización educativa en América Latina: una cartografía de políticas, tendencias y trayectorias. Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. [Online] https://www.ei-ie.org/es/item/25708:la-privatizacion-educativa-en-america-latina-una-cartografia-de-politicas-tendencias-y-trayectorias.

4. Urgent progress is needed on financing the digital transformation of education

As noted by the countries in the Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education (UNESCO, 2021c), one of the major challenges for the region is to move forward with the financing necessary for the digital transformation of education systems. This effort goes beyond the education sector and requires enablers in the digital ecosystems of the respective countries. In other words, financing the digital transformation of education requires a cross-sectoral policy that involves various stakeholders from both government and the private sector and which is aimed at ensuring effective connectivity for the entire population. Along with this cross-sectoral financing effort, another way to support the digital transformation of education is to strengthen professional teacher training and digital skills development throughout the education community, both of which are necessary to implement and support this transformation process (Schleicher, 2022; Broadband Commission, 2021).

During the pandemic, the existing gaps in access to and use of digital technology became clear. Aware of these challenges, ECLAC has developed various proposals to advance towards an inclusive digital society and ensure universal access to digital technologies. Quality connectivity is a necessary requirement and must go hand in hand with access to appropriate devices and the digital skills necessary for the development of various online activities. UNICEF, through the *Reimagine Education* initiative, and the Broadband Commission (2021) have delved into the investment needs for digital education. Diagram 1 presents the three main areas of required investment: (i) physical infrastructure, (ii) educational resources and (iii) digital skills. Physical infrastructure refers to everything that involves investment in materials, public works, facilities and equipment that allows for universal access to effective connectivity, ranging from electricity requirements and Internet access in all territories to the selection and delivery of equipment to students and teachers. Digital education also implies adapting education systems through the creation of new resources, the use of platforms and the production of digital content. An alternative promoted by UNESCO is the use of open educational resources (known as OER platforms), which would reduce the cost of implementation and leverage economies of scale (Broadband Commission, 2021).[34] Finally, UNICEF and the Broadband Commission (2021) also stress that, for the digital transformation of education, it is essential to invest in digital skills training for the entire educational community and, in particular, for teachers, school administrators and parents and caregivers.

Diagram 1
Investment needed for digital transformation



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Broadband Commission (2021), Global Education Forum (2021) and UNICEF (2020b).

[34] The costs associated with the use of digital educational resources relate to the amount and extent of digital content, the number of specialised professionals required in schools, licences and subscriptions, and servers, among others.

Regarding the financing required for the digital transformation of education, ECLAC (2021e) estimated the annual cost of guaranteeing a basic digital basket to cover the existing gaps in the region. This basket would include monthly connection plans, a laptop, a smartphone and a tablet per household, and its average monthly cost —which does not include the cost of electricity— would be 1.8% of annual GDP in the countries where the estimate was drawn up[35] (ECLAC, 2021e). To implement this measure, ECLAC proposes a demand-side subsidy for low-income households, stressing that the success of this policy will largely depend on public-private coordination to ensure connectivity in the different territories. Other proposals to finance universal effective connectivity in households in the region include the temporary reduction of taxes on imports and sales of the specified digital devices, as well as the promotion of partnerships to produce devices at a lower price at the regional level (ECLAC, 2020a, 2020b; ECLAC, 2021e). The Broadband Commission (2021) conducted a simulation for the case of Honduras and estimated that the cost required to implement a hybrid education system would be US$ 239 million between 2022 and 2030, not including connectivity costs, which breaks down to approximately US$ 17 per student annually. UNICEF (2020b) estimates that content development would cost approximately US$ 267 million in the countries of the region, while the cost of equipment would be US$ 2.077 billion by 2030.

The digital transformation of education is without a doubt a major regional challenge that will involve a significant financial effort. However, the efforts already undertaken during the pandemic represent a unique opportunity for countries in the region to transform their education systems to improve learning, respond to the challenges of the future and take advantage of the benefits of cutting-edge technologies.

[35] The countries where the cost of the digital basket was estimated were the Plurinational State of Bolivia, El Salvador, Peru, Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil, Costa Rica and Chile (ECLAC, 2021e).

IV. Towards transformative and inclusive recovery in education

The Latin American and Caribbean region has made great advances in expanding coverage and reducing educational inequality in the last 20 years. The countries have implemented active policies by mostly extending the years of compulsory education to secondary school and by taking measures for the inclusion of historically excluded population groups. As a result, progress was made in reducing the number of over-aged students in primary and secondary education and lowering grade repetition rates (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). Furthermore, one very relevant indicator in the last two decades was that the increase in lower and upper secondary completion rates was even greater than the increase in coverage, which is directly tied to the efforts made by countries to expand secondary education through alternative channels, thus strengthening the educational trajectories of adolescents and young people, especially those from more vulnerable contexts (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).

However, the SDG 4 targets agreed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were not met before the pandemic and meeting them now is even less likely after these two years during which education systems in the region have been deeply affected. Already since 2015, there has been a slowing trend in access to, progression in and completion of education for children and adolescents. In some indicators this shows the limits of reaching the most difficult populations, such as children with disabilities, people living in remote rural areas and members of lower-income socioeconomic households. The difficulties in including these hard-to-reach populations experiencing educational exclusion are reflected in the stagnation of access indicators. Other indicators show improvements and encouraging achievements, some common to the region and some specific to certain countries. But overall, the effect of a more recent period marked by economic hardship, policy discontinuity and the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is already apparent (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).

UNESCO, UNICEF and ECLAC have made an urgent call to speed up progress on the education goals set in 2015 with more investment, social participation, dialogue and State capacities to lead the processes of improvement and systemic transformation of education in the region. Recovery requires a profound transformation of education systems that addresses the structural factors that contribute to the education deficit and inequality in the region. In this light, this paper argues that the pandemic is an opportunity to take urgent action to recover and transform education systems.

A. Ensuring continuity of face-to-face classes and learning recovery without leaving anyone behind

The pandemic has revealed the essential role that schools and educational establishments play in the holistic development and protection of children, adolescents and young people. In addition to being spaces where students acquire knowledge and life skills, schools allow for socialisation among peers and with adults outside their families. They are also places where States can detect or prevent violations of fundamental rights, such as the right to adequate nutrition and the right to live a life free from various forms of exploitation, violence and abuse. Thus, it is important to consider that, although the pandemic is ongoing and there will be other emergencies to tackle in the future, school closures should be the last measure used among a broad set of tools to minimise health risk in the student population. This set of tools should include, among other measures, prioritising teachers in vaccination schedules, developing health safety protocols and monitoring mechanisms to detect and control infections in a timely manner, and ensuring adequate levels of infrastructure in schools so that everyone has proper ventilation and access to drinking water, as well as making soap, masks and disinfectants available, among other essential elements for self-care. However, the best way to ensure adequate sanitary conditions in schools is to work together with families and caregivers through transparent communication of the measures and criteria to promote their trust and collaboration.

Returning to face-to-face classes requires paying special attention to the inequality effect that has been observed in the educational experience over the last two years. Efforts must be focused on meeting the different needs of the students who faced greater obstacles to the continuity of their learning processes during the periods of distance learning, including the needs for socio-emotional support and those related to learning recovery and educational reintegration. These efforts require greater coordination between education policies and other social policies, such as health and social protection, as well as the strengthening of school teams with specialists who have the tools to address and manage specific problems that go beyond the professional skills of teachers and school managers.

1. Supporting the social and emotional well-being of students and the educational community

In recent years, students, their families and teachers have faced various social and economic challenges that have significantly affected their well-being and mental health. Because social and emotional care is inseparable from the learning process, recovery efforts must include a strong emphasis on supporting students to ensure their social and emotional well-being. Furthermore, given educators' central role in teaching and learning processes, it is equally important to support them to ensure their well-being following the pandemic and provide them with the tools they need to create a culture of trust and respect within the classroom, where students can feel seen and heard.

Recognising that teachers do not necessarily have the professional training to address the full range of their students' social and emotional needs, school staff should be strengthened with professionals that have the skills to provide this type of support and guidance. Strengthening and diversifying the professional staff with counsellors or tutors is not only key to the recovery of social and emotional well-being and learning after the prolonged school closures but is also necessary to help students create a strong attachment to the education system and thus sustain their educational trajectories (see section C) (Acosta, 2022).

2. Resuming and strengthening diagnostic and formative evaluations

To support the necessary actions for learning recovery, as well as to provide feedback on the pedagogical and support practices implemented in schools, countries must collect timely information to know and monitor the status, progress and setbacks in their students' learning processes. A first step, more than two years into the pandemic, is to prioritise large-scale diagnostic assessments to establish a clear understanding of key learning losses and to establish a baseline against which the impact of recovery strategies can be assessed. To the extent possible, these assessments should allow for comparisons over time, especially with findings obtained prior to the pandemic.

A second step is the need to design ways of translating the information gathered into concrete and timely actions to address educational needs and gaps quickly and efficiently. This entails, on the one hand, building State capacities to ensure that the information is used in designing actions and, on the other, empowering teachers through relevant training that allows them to use the findings to support recovery processes and address learning gaps (Herrero and others, 2022). In conjunction with these efforts, learning recovery could also be fostered through a more effective use of formative assessments in the classroom, which aim to provide feedback on individual learning processes and introduce pedagogical adjustments that respond to students' specific needs (Perusia, 2021). In these processes, the use of digital media for learning and innovation can be hugely beneficial in teaching (see section E).

3. Establishing remedial measures for learning recovery

The pandemic affected students differently, depending on the various characteristics of individuals and their families and educational environments. Not everyone was able to continue their learning processes in the same way. When face-to-face classes resume, it is important to ensure that all schools and educational establishments can deliver teaching processes at the appropriate level for their students and remediate learning losses. Measures to facilitate teaching and learning in this new reality include streamlining the curriculum to prioritise content that is considered critical; modifying academic calendars to compensate for periods of distance learning (e.g. through summer school programmes); and cancelling final exams (using other sources of information if necessary, such as the existing grades) (World Bank, 2021).

There are other remedial measures that could be implemented to balance out learning and reduce gaps within classrooms. The type of support to be provided will depend on students' specific needs and their contexts, and may include small group tutoring during or outside of school hours, online tutoring programmes, individual guidance or psychological counselling to address the social and emotional needs of specific students, or pedagogical interventions to support the development of skills that foster accelerated learning (such as metacognitive skills or collaborative learning), among others. In this context, supporting teachers to have the knowledge and skills to implement teaching processes at the appropriate level is a key element. Remediation efforts may require additional investment of resources, and especially to reorganise teachers' time and/or hire new temporary or permanent professionals to ensure sustained remediation efforts for as long as necessary. Hybrid learning can be particularly useful for reorganising teaching and learning times, incorporating independent study time that gives teachers more freedom to lead remedial programmes (World Bank, 2021).

4. Implementing targeted strategies for students most at risk of disengaging from and dropping out of school

During the school reopening and educational recovery period, countries will need to implement targeted actions for groups most at risk of disengaging from and dropping out of school. Today more than ever, equality and inclusion in access to education and training must be emphasised while a greater focus needs to be placed on more vulnerable population groups, including indigenous peoples, communities of African descent, refugees and migrants, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, people with disabilities, and gender and sexually diverse people (ECLAC/UNESCO, 2020). Developing selective

prevention strategies for the population most at risk of dropping out of school could be one possibility, as well as establishing or strengthening early warning systems that facilitate the monitoring of this student population by taking advantage of digital media (see section E for more details). To do this, redistributing resources, and psychological and psychosocial support services to schools, classes and at-risk students is key. Finally, it is also important to connect the support available through education policies with social protection policies for households, as well as with health policies and mental health support for students, teachers and their families (see section C).

B. Tackling inequalities in education and ensuring the right to inclusive and quality education

1. Securing the education financing needed to reclaim and transform education

Increased investment in education in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent decades has gone hand in hand with an increase in school coverage, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels. However, despite this progress, significant quality and inclusion challenges and issues related to expanding coverage in pre-primary and upper-secondary education remain. Postponing efforts to address these challenges represents a considerable risk to the education of children and adolescents in the region and to achieving sustainable, inclusive and resilient development (Rivas, 2021).

In addition to greater resource availability, actions must be geared towards greater efficiency and equity in education system planning and management. Accordingly, the ministers of education and the education authorities of Latin America and the Caribbean agreed in the recent Buenos Aires Declaration (2022)[36] "to take urgent action to recover and transform our education systems in ways that restore hope to an entire generation of children and young people whose future could be compromised if we do not act decisively and quickly" (p. 3). They recognised and renewed the agreements reached at the First Regional Meeting of Ministers in 2017,[37] which include:

(i) The strengthening and modernisation of the institutional frameworks and governance of educational systems to promote accountability and transparency and strengthen the participation of all partners involved at all levels of the education system.

(ii) Advocating for strengthening quality public education as a guarantor for building democracy and fairer societies, adopting lifelong learning as the organising principle of education.

(iii) Maintain, optimise and progressively increase funding for education in our countries in accordance with the national context and in keeping with our citizens' economic, social and cultural rights.

In this regard, education authorities recognise that meeting the targets agreed upon in SDG 4 by 2030 requires adequate public financing conditions and strong government capacities to translate these resources into consistent and systemic actions to improve public education in their respective countries. In other words, it is important not only to invest more money in the region's education systems but also to ensure that these resources are used in the best possible way. They must be allocated equitably among students and territories to guarantee that educational achievement is not dependent on students' economic resources or on other factors that engender disadvantages, such as ethnicity and race, disability, distance between home and school and the cultural capital of households, among others.

[36] Buenos Aires Declaration (2022), III Regional Meeting of Educational Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, "El derecho a la educación en contexto: recuperar y transformar", 26–27 May 2022, Buenos Aires, Republic of Argentina. [Online] https://inee.org/es/recursos/declaracion-de-buenos-aires-2022.

[37] Buenos Aires Declaration Regional Meeting of Educational Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, 24–25 January 2017, Buenos Aires, Republic of Argentina. [Online] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247286.

2. Continuing the expansion of quality early childhood education

Expanding early childhood education coverage must be a priority in the regional policy agenda for equality. Scientific research and findings show that social investment at this stage of life (Rossel, 2022) not only impacts well-being at later stages but is a more efficient investment than other possible alternatives (Heckman, 2012). Actions taken to support child development, particularly early in life, have impacts on cognitive and neural development at a stage when the brain is most sensitive to nurturing environments and timely stimulation (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Clarke-Stewart and Fein, 1983). Cognitive stimulation and quality care have a positive impact on children's future development because they are both factors in cognitive and psychomotor development, attention span and activity levels (ECLAC, 2010). As mentioned in chapter II of this document, early education improves the future educational prospects of children in later educational cycles. It also has important effects on other dimensions of well-being, such as social and emotional well-being, job performance and later adult earnings (Schweinhart, 2004 in Rossel, 2022).

As noted in the Social Panorama of Latin America 2010, expanding the educational offering at the pre-primary (3 to 5 years) and early childhood development (0 to 3 years) levels, as well as appropriate policies that promote and facilitate access for the most vulnerable populations, contribute to strengthening a significant educational foundation for combating problems such as school dropout and grade repetition, thus supporting the educational and learning trajectory leaving no one behind. It is not enough to guarantee access; the institutional offer must be high-quality, professional and specialised.

3. Reorganising institutional conditions for universal access to secondary education with a view to inclusion

The diversification of institutions providing secondary education as a mechanism to guarantee access to the right to education as part of efforts to extend compulsory secondary education in the region has allowed for considerable progress in coverage and inclusion of new populations. This mechanism has also expanded educational opportunities for students with different interests and needs, such as those in rural areas or who work and study simultaneously. However, this diversification of providers has occurred in tandem with a process of segmentation in Latin American countries that separates students into institutions that offer education of different quality (Braslavsky, 2019). While not a policy objective, this de facto segmentation is an ad hoc consequence that has been sustained over time and contributes to reproducing structural social inequality (Acosta, 2022).

Public policies can contribute to reducing these inequalities by creating the conditions for equitable and equal access to quality education regardless of the school. "There is a need to recognise, appreciate and build on the diversity and different needs of students, but without compromising the quality and relevance of the education provided" (ECLAC, 2022a, p. 34). The evidence on the challenges of institutional diversification and equitable access to education indicates at least three crucial aspects of the institutional organisation that should be considered in policy design and implementation.

First, it is important for decision-makers to recognise that the transition between educational levels is a key moment in students' trajectories, and in some cases operates as a turning point that determines continuity or dropout (Braslavsky, 2019). The region improved effective transition rates between primary and lower secondary levels between 2010 and 2016 (Acosta, 2022), but the situation is more complex between the lower and upper secondary levels. Therefore, education policies at national and subnational levels need to implement more actions to facilitate and support students during these transitions. This involves removing barriers to access, such as exams or performance indicators required to move up to the next level, and rethinking how students are grouped together and the related economic

costs. Additionally, during transition periods, students often fall into an institutional vacuum where they do not yet belong to any institution, as they have graduated from one level and have not yet joined the next. Measures to facilitate their transition include better communication between institutions and implementing information systems that allow for the monitoring of student trajectories.

Second, in line with the difficulties associated with transitioning between levels, students having to choose a specialisation early on in their school trajectory is also reported as an obstacle (Acosta, 2022). Choosing a specialisation is particularly complex for students from more vulnerable socioeconomic sectors during the transition between primary and secondary school since, in many cases, families and students do not have the cultural capital to make the choices that best suit their preferences and needs, or their cultural traditions and preferences prevent them from understanding the implications of the different alternatives offered by the system (Acosta, 2022). Among the unintended consequences of specialised tracks is consolidating segments of different quality within the system (Acosta, 2022; Braslavsky, 2001). Accordingly, one strong recommendation that emerges from research by Acosta (2022) is to eliminate specialisations or delay institutional differentiation until the final stages of secondary education.

Third, empirical evidence shows that supportive individuals such as tutors, guidance counsellors and teachers focused on academic reinforcement play an important role in school continuity (Acosta, 2022). Students interviewed in six countries in the region —Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay— highlighted the importance of these individuals in their learning processes and adaptation to the new educational cycle (Acosta, 2022). However, although tutoring or mentoring has a long tradition in Latin America (Acosta and Terigi, 2015), it has rarely been incorporated as an essential component of education systems.

4. Addressing gender inequality with differentiated strategies for women and men

Despite significant progress in educational access, progression and completion for women in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent decades (among the younger generations, the average years of education among women even surpass those of men), gender inequality persists. First, women's greater achievements in education are not reflected in the labour market, where the situation is very unequal. Additionally, throughout their educational trajectories, important inequalities and biases are maintained in the areas of training that reproduce entrenched cultural stereotypes in the region. More specifically, women in the region tend to be educated in areas more associated with caregiving, such as health and education, and less in the areas of science, technology and mathematics, which are more highly valued in economic terms in the labour market. Furthermore, the reasons men and women drop out of school differ, with women's reasons being mainly related to caregiving and unpaid domestic work and, especially, teenage pregnancy and motherhood. In contrast, men's reasons are more often linked to the need to earn income for the household. Finally, it is also important to make visible the experiences of violence that interfere with students' educational trajectories and particularly affect women and LGBTI+ students.

Promoting inclusive trajectories in the region requires addressing gender inequality in a differentiated manner in education systems. It is important to change institutional and cultural practices within school systems, as these affect female students' opportunities and development alternatives from an early age. They not only lead to significant inequality in well-being between men and women but also affect different countries' economic and social development potential. Moreover, despite men and women having similar levels of access to and use of digital media, it is important to highlight the differences that exist between their skills and experiences, paying special attention to the needs of girls and adolescents regarding training in self-care and risk management strategies when using these media, as well as promoting the development of other digital skills.

C. Education cannot be solved by the education sector alone: coordination with other public policy sectors is necessary

The region of Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most unequal in the world, and some of these inequalities persist and are reproduced in education. The region has not succeeded in transforming the education system into a powerful mechanism for creating equal opportunities; the continuity of structural inequalities shows the limits of its action. Actions must be implemented to ensure that all children, adolescents and youth enjoy adequate schooling conditions that take a holistic view of their well-being and guarantee their rights. This, among other measures, entails greater coordination of education policies with policies in other areas of welfare, such as nutrition and the physical, social and emotional health of students, the economic welfare of households, the protection of students from violence, and the linking of the education sector with labour, transport and care policies, among other aspects (López, 2021).

Income transfers and their educational components are one of the few tools that have been implemented in the region for comprehensive and sustained social protection efforts aimed at children, adolescents and young people. These programmes have been an important tool to prevent students from dropping out of school, particularly after the pandemic, because they help foster students' attachment to school (as in the case of conditional transfers or educational scholarships, for example) and alleviate household income losses, thus reducing the incentives for adolescents and youth to drop out of school and find employment to contribute to the family economy. Rossel and others (2022) highlight international and regional evidence of the favourable impact of transfer programmes with education components on various achievements, including increases in enrolment, school attendance and cumulative years of education, as well as completion rates in primary and secondary education and the probability of staying in school. Ministries of education could benefit from greater coordination with social protection institutions to target special actions to attract and keep in school the students from more vulnerable contexts or those who have disengaged from education for the longest time.

Coordination between the education sector with the labour world must be strengthened, especially at the secondary level. Tomorrow's labour market requires easily transferable skills between jobs and professions that respond to uncertainty and new technological and environmental demands. It is essential to have training and education policies that cover the entire life cycle and are linked to the labour world and productive sectors. The highly dynamic nature of the world today requires that both young people and adults have opportunities to acquire new skills throughout their life cycle to complement those they already have. The strategic role of short technical and vocational programmes should be highlighted and strengthened in the region. In general, these programmes have multiple positive attributes: they are of shorter duration and less costly, they can be coordinated with other consecutive programmes of higher complexity for continuing education and with vocational secondary education programmes, and they are closely tied to the labour market and can more easily integrate real-world experiences in their training process, such as professional internships (Valenzuela and Yañez, 2022).

Another element highlighted as a determining factor in the educational experience and trajectory of students in the region, especially in their transition to secondary school, is the travel to school. Both rural and urban students have cited this factor as a significant obstacle to schooling; the distances and times involved are a key issue for rural students, while safety concerns along their route are a problem for urban students (especially women). For the same reason, linking the education system with mobility and transport policies is another measure to help keep students in school (Acosta, 2022). Additionally, as mentioned in this document, linking schools with food services and mental and physical health services is key to ensuring the availability of professionals other than teachers who can take care of students' needs. These professionals can address issues that may have worsened during the pandemic, such as socio-emotional well-being and sexual and reproductive health. Finally, to achieve progress in gender equality, connecting the education system with care policies is essential. In addition to policies to prevent

unwanted pregnancies, the implementation of anti-discrimination policies towards young pregnant women and mothers should be strengthened, as well as the provision of free childcare for teenage mothers and young women who have not completed their studies, especially those from low-income backgrounds (Rico and Trucco, 2013).

D. The importance of not returning to the pre-pandemic situation and building on the lessons learned from recent experience

1. Building a culture of innovation and collaboration among educational community stakeholders that is focused on the quality and pertinence of education

Over the past few years, education systems have shown significant capacity to implement small-scale innovations to maintain teaching and learning processes during the coronavirus pandemic. Following the return to face-to-face classes, it is important for governments to continue encouraging these spaces for flexibility and creativity and to foster innovation at every layer of the education system (OECD–Education International, 2021). The costs of the pandemic in learning, school dropout rates and social and emotional well-being can be addressed by fostering innovation within schools and education systems. This can be accomplished, for example, by finding new ways to combine remote education and face-to-face classes, using digital technologies to support teachers' work and students' autonomous learning, or implementing practices to foster the development of socioemotional skills and greater involvement of parents or caregivers in their children's education.

Fostering a culture of innovation within the education community requires strengthening teachers' professional autonomy so that they have the flexibility and skills to adapt to the needs of their students and facilitating collaborative channels for sharing and refining ideas among different teachers and schools. It also means designing and implementing strategies to identify, disseminate and scale up successful practices. It is essential to invest in capacity-building for the different educational stakeholders, especially teachers, given their central role in teaching and learning processes. In addition to ensuring the right working conditions for teaching to be a profession of excellence, actions need to be implemented to develop the skills teachers need to become active agents of change; in other words, they need to not only be able to implement innovations but also have the skills to design them in response to their students' needs.

During the pandemic, various partnerships emerged or were strengthened between governments, schools, teachers, their organisations and other educational stakeholders. Such partnerships provide learning experiences and offer spaces that can be leveraged to build a culture of innovation and collaboration that should be sustained over time as a legacy of the crisis. The significant challenges of quality and equity in education in the region require the constructive collaboration of different stakeholders and the effective use of local, national and international data. In this way, the pandemic can be an opportunity to analyse which actions worked best in which contexts and understand why certain strategies were successful and others were not. Learning from these experiences requires collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data from various sources, including students, households, teachers, school administrators and public policymakers.

2. Promoting the development of cognitive and socioemotional skills and fostering the role of teachers in the learning process

The challenge for the region is to achieve more years of education among the new generations and improve the quality and results of the education processes. The skills being taught and the gaps in learning outcomes, on which little progress has been achieved in recent decades, are a vital concern in the

region (UNESCO-OREALC/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). Chapter II of this document illustrated the deficits and challenges in teaching the skill set outlined in the framework of the ECLAC/OEI study (2020), which new generations will need if they are to participate fully as citizens in today's global and dynamic society. This skill set includes three categories of general skills: cognitive skills, which consist of basic and higher-order complex skills (including digital skills); socio-emotional skills; and physical and motor skills.

Skills relate to the holistic development of people and the knowledge aimed at applying and integrating different types of learning to solve specific problems. National curricula of compulsory education in the region do not entirely follow a skills-based model; to do so, it is necessary to reconsider a range of aspects, from policy agendas to classroom teaching practices, including learning assessment and organisational management to enhance curricular autonomy. In other words, despite the international narrative on skills in an educational context, which has been referenced significantly in the national legislation of several countries in the region, the implementation of competency-based educational models is still an ongoing practice, the consolidation of which requires coordination at the level of educational, curricular and assessment policies (ECLAC/OEI, 2020).

Among the principles proposed by UNESCO (2021a) in the report that contributed to the discussions of the Transforming Education Summit are the pedagogical goals of cooperation and solidarity between students and teachers and the inclusion of different kinds of knowledge into curricula. Education should reflect and encourage the building of the societies we truly want. As such, it is important for educational spaces to invite students to unlearn biases, prejudices and divisions, and contribute to healing historical injustices, creating opportunities for children, adolescents and young people to learn from and value each other, regardless of their differences in gender, religion, race, sexual identity, social class, disability and nationality, among others. In addition, considering both the social and environmental challenges of the contemporary world, it is important for education to be based on the principles of reciprocity and care and to recognise the interdependence between the different individuals, population groups and species that live in the world (UNESCO, 2021).

In addition to the challenges associated with technological change and the climate crisis, the new generations also face specific challenges related to the region's considerable levels of social and economic inequality, including high rates of exposure to violence and political, economic and social instability. Social and emotional skills, understood as the skills set related to the ability to understand oneself, relate to others and adapt to different life contexts, emerge as particularly relevant in this context. The experience of school closures during the pandemic highlighted the importance of learning skills such as flexibility, adaptability, stress management, collaboration, empathy and creativity, which were crucial for coping with the abrupt shift to remote education and mitigating the negative impacts of the crisis. Furthermore, in the emergency context, it became clear that no one learns alone; the situation revealed the importance of the role of teachers and families in the teaching and learning processes and that students need social and emotional well-being and motivation to learn.

To achieve the above, it is important to revalue the role of teachers, care for and transform the school as a learning environment and consider education in non-traditional spaces and times. Teachers are central to education systems because they convey educations' ideals, values and goals. Therefore, UNESCO calls for making teaching more professionalised and proposes: (i) creating spaces for collaboration and teamwork; (ii) making knowledge production and research an integral part of teaching; (iii) respecting teachers' autonomy and professional judgment; and iv) involving them in public dialogue on the future visions for education. This transformation must also include the school, shown by the COVID-19 crisis as a valuable space for socialisation and community beyond teaching. Again, the UNESCO report (2021a) calls for schools to be protected as safe spaces for students to meet and take on new challenges and possibilities in their learning process.

The experience of periods of confinement and the suspension of face-to-face classes opened opportunities to innovate and move towards other forms of teaching. For example, it became possible to plan with teachers from other disciplines or areas and divide tasks according to teachers' preferences or their different strengths (i.e., teachers with excellent public speaking skills or those better suited to developing teaching materials or monitoring students). In other words, teaching could be done in ways that do not always involve being at the front of the classroom, which could provide opportunities for career development (Acosta, 2022). In short, remote education has highlighted the central role of teachers in teaching and learning processes, as well as the fact that hybrid learning provides more tools to enhance their work, facilitates support outside the classroom and contributes to identifying students' different learning levels and needs, plan classes and activities and better communicate with parents and caregivers (Arias Ortiz and others, 2021b).

Teaching practices focused on developing students' socio-emotional skills are a relatively new element in the school context. Traditionally, classroom teaching practices have focused on learning subjects and followed a hierarchical organisation where students are passive actors. However, given that scientific evidence has demonstrated the value of social and emotional skills not only for students' holistic development but also for the improvement of learning processes, in recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on the importance of having spaces and tools to foster these skills.

In a recent report on the subject, Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes (2020) highlight five actions to promote social and emotional skills in schools effectively: (i) include these skills in learning standards, (ii) develop them in teachers, (iii) promote cooperation between educational stakeholders, such as school managers, parents and the community, (iv) have positive learning contexts where relationships between teachers and students develop in a climate of cooperation and respect; and (v) implement —either explicitly or implicitly— the sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE) approach. The SAFE approach refers to using sequenced skills development activities and active forms of learning, as well as a focus on developing one or more social skills and explicit objectives regarding the specific skills to be developed (p. 10). More specifically, developing social and emotional skills in the classroom requires more than merely including them in the curriculum. It also requires efforts to teach them through concrete pedagogical practices, which entail strengthening teachers' initial and continuous teacher training to shift the emphasis of teaching (to treat students and active agents) and provide psychosocial training as well as training related to the rights of children and adolescents, youth cultures and violence prevention and teaching with digital media, among other relevant topics.

E. Strengthening digital education: technology to support schools

Various obstacles to the continuity of teaching and learning arose from the pandemic, but the health crisis also unleashed an innovative force in education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean, demonstrating that learning can occur outside traditional educational spaces. Faced with the need for remote education, countries stepped up the use of digital technologies to deliver content mainly remotely and invested in bridging the digital divide in connectivity. Although countries and territories in the region already had education management information systems in place prior to the pandemic, during the prolonged school closures, solutions had to be implemented on the fly to address new data needs, either by increasing the frequency of collection, implementing new non-face-to-face collection methods and/or modifying the data collected, among other adaptations (UNESCO-OREALC, 2021a).

The use of information and communication technologies in education is nothing new. Since the 1980s, countries in the region have recognised the importance of reducing the digital divide and modernising learning processes using technologies to promote cognitive skills acquisition (Sunkel, Trucco and Espejo, 2014). In addition to improving the quality of education by incorporating digital media in student learning and teacher training processes, the importance of digital transformation to achieve educational efficiency and equity objectives has also been acknowledged insofar as greater and better

use of digital technologies allows for improvements in management and coverage (Sunkel, Trucco and Espejo, 2014). These pandemic years have reinforced the need to implement a digital transformation strategy for education (Vincent-Lacrin, 2022). The pandemic accelerated previous progress, particularly in terms of establishing guidelines on digital content and consolidating resource repositories; however, it is key for countries to leverage the opportunity and lessons learned from this experience to give new impetus to education and consolidate the progress made (Cardini and others, 2021).

1. Using digital media to strengthen teaching and learning processes

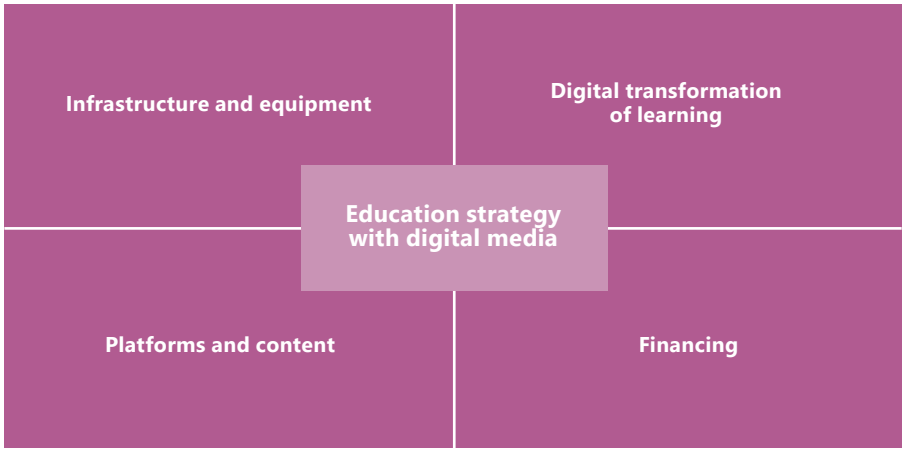
Digital education refers to a system where technological resources, especially digital resources, are used to support, complement and enhance teaching and learning processes. During the pandemic, digital education was implemented to provide remote education. In the current phase of returning to face-to-face classes, the lessons learned should be applied to move towards hybrid models that keep digital technologies in education. UNESCO defines hybrid learning as a learning approach combining distance learning through different channels and in-person learning, i.e. where online and offline components are included to enhance the learner experience and ensure learning continuity through a student-centred approach (Fullan and others, 2020; Broadband Commission, 2021). Hybrid learning can take various forms ranging from a student attending school one day a week and receiving remote education the other days, to students attending school all week and using remote education after school as a supplementary measure to accelerate their learning. The decision as to which system is best will depend on a number of factors, including the needs stemming from the social and educational context (Lugo, 2021).

Digital education and, in particular, hybrid learning models are especially useful in the current context as they provide tools that can be harnessed for learning recovery, address the increased risk of school dropout and expand educational coverage in the wake of these pandemic years. Planners and teachers can diversify their students' experience by providing personalised monitoring of their progress by delivering varied materials and designing different curricular tracks. Doing so can facilitate self-directed learning experiences in which students learn at their own pace and according to their own needs, thus helping them to bridge gaps (Mateo Díaz and Lee, 2020; Arias Ortiz and others, 2021a; Ripani, 2022; Broadband Commission, 2021). Additionally, having the option to create more flexible educational processes means educators can better respond to students' interests and motivations, thus helping to reduce their risk of dropping out.

Finally, digital education also makes it possible to expand access and reduce coverage gaps, especially at the secondary school level. Technology use can be particularly useful for expanding access to education in remote areas, as demonstrated by the experience of distance learning in Mexico and its positive impact on enrolment and graduation rates in isolated areas (Fábregas, 2017; Navarro-Sola, 2019). There are also important advances in assistive technology that can be integrated into digital education for the equity and inclusion of students with disabilities. Moreover, the digitalisation of education can provide a space for accessing a host of educational resources at low cost, as well as contribute to extending access to informal education and support lifelong learning (increasingly relevant in the context of changing labour markets) and within different communities (Broadband Commission, 2021).

For the incorporation of technologies in education to be viable, the foundation must be laid for their implementation (see diagram 2). This goes hand in hand with greater coordination of the digital education strategy with the various relevant cross-sectoral stakeholders and with each country's digital strategy and overall efforts to reduce the digital divide among their citizens.

Diagram 2
Pillars for education with digital media



Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of Arias Ortiz (2021a) and Broadband Commission (2021).

(a) Ensuring universal access to digital infrastructure and equipment

Greater investment in equipment and connectivity in schools and households is essential to implementing an inclusive digital education policy that guarantees the structural conditions that allow for a smooth transition between the classroom and the digital world, leaving no one behind (Cardini and others, 2021). Actions to achieve the digital transformation of education would benefit from greater coordination with each country's digital strategy and more extensive efforts to reduce the connectivity gap. As the pandemic showed, a major challenge in the region is to expand connectivity in rural areas. While progress is being made in securing advanced connections in remote areas, first-generation media (such as television and radio) will be useful tools while hybrid learning modalities are implemented.

(b) Digital transformation of learning

Online or remote education is not simply about implementing a digital version of face-to-face education; it must have specific features to produce the expected effect (Martínez, 2022). First, the inclusion of technologies in education systems is based on implementing a student-focused learning system. Doing so requires greater flexibility to adapt teaching processes to students' needs, circumstances and contexts (Mateo Díaz and Lee, 2020). The way content is taught and assessed must be modified, with more "spaces and opportunities in which students can learn in a variety of ways and on diverse, interconnected tracks, supported in their proactive and responsible use of technology" (UNESCO IBE, 2021).

The digital transformation of learning also requires the entire education community to be prepared for the changes. This entails investing in capacity-building for teachers to teach using these technologies, feel empowered and have the flexibility to edit, enrich and adapt digital resources and students' curricular tracks to their particular needs (Cardini and others, 2021). Their feedback would, in turn, allow for the creation of official channels for innovation and continuous improvement of the resources available and the design of the various curricular tracks.

Second, the use of digital technologies and hybrid learning systems also requires greater involvement of caregivers and parents. As the Kids Online studies found, mediation in the digital environment is crucial for children and adolescents (Trucco and Palma, 2020; Arias Ortiz, Hincapié and Paredes, 2020): in contrast to more restrictive strategies, active mediation strategies are positively associated with the opportunities offered by digital spaces (Trucco, Claro and Cabello, 2022). Therefore, the education community must be prepared to mediate these processes. In concrete, this means that adults can be trained in digital skills to guide their children's education and encourage their appropriation and skills development processes while also participating in the digital world themselves.

(c) Facilitating access to and use of platforms and content

The number of resources available through digital media and the Internet is infinite, and one of the most concrete ways digitalisation can contribute to education. However, the region faces significant challenges and greater efforts are needed to make high-quality educational content and resources freely available, easily accessible and usable and, where possible, aligned with formal curricula. Such content should also be available in different languages, adaptable and contextually relevant. In this regard, promoting and using open educational resources is a particularly powerful alternative for the region (United Nations, 2022). Debate and discussion should be encouraged to promote creativity when developing resources that complement hybrid learning and to position teachers as central actors in the process of creating platforms and digital content.

(d) Securing financing to implement the digital transformation strategy

As discussed in chapter III, the financing strategy for these educational models should have a cross-sectoral approach related to each country's digital transformation strategy. To ensure financial sustainability, cooperation among the various relevant stakeholders is required to both safeguard investment in "hard" assets such as infrastructure and equipment access and also move forward with "soft" investment to develop the fundamental skills needed by the various stakeholders to adequately use and take advantage of new technologies, as well as their effective inclusion in the teaching and learning processes.

2. Developing and strengthening education management information systems

Education management information systems (EMIS) can be defined as "the ensemble of operational processes, increasingly supported by digital technology, that enables the collection, aggregation, analysis and use of data and information in education, for management and administration, planning, policy formulation, and monitoring and evaluation" (UNESCO, 2018b, p. 8). The main audiences targeted by EMIS include central, intermediate and local educational institutions, students and their parents/caregivers, teachers and school assistants.

Ideally, EMIS allow data produced in different departments of ministries of education to be combined with data collected or produced in other sectors (such as health, transport and social protection) or institutions at the national, local or intermediate levels. However, in the region, information systems have tended to develop in a fragmented manner, with multiple disconnected systems and platforms coexisting. The pandemic has highlighted the need to integrate different information systems to obtain a more complete assessment of the situation of the various educational communities and to respond in a more timely manner to the specific needs of the different stakeholders (UNESCO, 2021d).

Although education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean have made progress in incorporating digital technologies into their management processes, these advances have been mainly limited to equipping schools with technological equipment and consolidating online digital materials. Major challenges and opportunities for improvement remain that are even more relevant in the context of educational recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the biggest challenges to improving the use of information for educational management is to solve the problem of the lack of interoperability of information systems, which, in general, have been created to tackle specific needs and demands and do not have a comprehensive, strategic vision. This vision would require more human and financial resources to develop a coordinated platform to facilitate and optimise educational systems management to provide useful information to the various educational community stakeholders (Arias Ortiz and others, 2021a).

EMIS must be strengthened to be useful tools at the central level and facilitate schools' operation and strategic management. Through EMIS, for example, school principals and administrators could collect data such as the workloads of different educational professionals, the list of available resources or the use assigned to different areas within schools. In addition, some aspects of human resources and budget management, such as payroll or medical and administrative leave, could be automated. Moreover, few countries have digital processes for enrolment and registration or for issuing degrees and certificates (Arias Ortiz and others, 2021b).

Meanwhile, teachers could also benefit from integrated and digitalised information systems: they could have easier access to data that would facilitate lesson planning, such as data on attendance, grades or student discipline records. It could also be useful for both teachers and school administrators to have information that would allow them to learn more about the realities faced by their students outside of school and to have a record of the complementary services that address their needs (such as subsidies for food, transport, school supplies and other scholarships). Information systems could also function as a communication channel between school and home through which parents or caregivers could access information about their children's performance (or of children in their care) and materials that would allow them to be more involved in their learning.

Additionally, although there are positive experiences in the region regarding the use of unique and geotagged school identifiers, countries would also benefit from the implementation of protocols and procedures for the continual updating of information on physical infrastructure (e.g. the number of classrooms, restrooms, furniture and laboratories) and equipment of schools (e.g. technological resources) to guide and optimise maintenance plans and response to school demands or specific emergencies. Last but not least, these innovations require simultaneous and urgent action to implement security systems and protocols to protect educational data by filtering available information by users, providing confidence and peace of mind. Therefore, it is vital to move forward with regulations on protecting users, especially regarding children's rights and the responsibility of the private sector for personal data protection.

F. Agreeing on a new and broad social pact for education with a long-term strategic vision

Achieving SDG 4, sustaining the advances of recent decades and breaking critical areas of exclusion will require coordinating efforts and integrating them into other dimensions of development. Educational and general welfare advances in the region had already been experiencing a slowdown in recent decades, and the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on and exacerbated the existing inequality deficits. New education policy measures must acknowledge historical deficits affecting the most excluded population groups in order to guarantee their right to education, in terms of both availability and access to learning opportunities and in the provision of quality education that is relevant and adapted to their conditions, needs and aspirations (ECLAC, 2022a).

As stated at the closing of the First Regional Seminar on Social Development organised by ECLAC in 2021: "The role of the State has expanded in the shadow of a crisis that was initially seen as a temporary, wide-ranging emergency but that has turned into a prolonged crisis: one that can no longer be addressed through temporary interventions or mechanisms, but rather is expanding the challenge of adapting and strengthening the State's medium- and long-term capacities to implement permanent policies and instruments designed in accordance with a structural approach. Education is a fundamental element in national development. To invest in education is to invest in people; it is to invest in the most basic asset that the region's countries have to undertake, such tasks as confronting inequality and achieving higher levels of development" (ECLAC, 2022a, p. 38).

This report suggests seeing this crisis as "an opportunity to progressively build true welfare states, which requires forging social compacts that new fiscal pacts must accompany, as well as rethinking the role of the State in the face of the challenges of inequality, sustainability, low productivity, technological shifts and climate change, and advancing towards universal, comprehensive and sustainable social protection systems" (ECLAC, 2022a and 2022b). Efforts to restructure education systems to be more inclusive and resilient must be connected to this broader debate in the region and to the proposals to transform education at the global level as put forward at the Transforming Education Summit. Education is a central focal point for development, equality and participation in a society that leaves no one behind.

It is essential to recognise the experience and best practices in teaching, to value the work of teachers and to leverage advances in technology to build the future. The background document for the Transforming Education Summit (UNESCO, 2021a) proposes a new social contract to make education

a common good and a public right, where pedagogies should focus on cooperation, solidarity and capacity-building of teachers and students together. This proposal suggests that the pedagogical goals of cooperation and solidarity should be based on the principles of non-discrimination, respect for diversity and justice according to the principles of care and reciprocity. In turn, if education is to be effectively guaranteed as a lifelong right, the pedagogy of the future must be considering throughout the life cycle, from early childhood to adulthood.

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