

The United Nations and education: the special needs of medium-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean¹

Antonio Prado, Deputy Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Education is essential to personal development: people look to education to fulfill multiple aspirations and as a means, for example, to broaden their opportunities.

Whether or not these expectations are met, however, depends on each society's understanding of the link between economic and human development and the full enjoyment of civil rights, which together enable citizens to reap the fruits of development.

Pursuing wellbeing through its link to education is to proceed along an uncertain path, which even for developed countries requires bold, ongoing efforts and transformations to remain in step with societies as they evolve. Even now, in Europe, the phenomenon of the “thousand-Euro” youth is casting some clouds over these expectations.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the most unequal region on the planet, the lag in the development of human resources, which arises from a myopic view of social investment, has limited the region's fuller participation in the globalized world and worked against the narrowing of the social gaps.

Let us recall what is at stake here: education does much more than merely integrate people into the labour market; it has far-reaching repercussions on all aspects of life. Econometric studies show, for example, that, along with access to basic infrastructure, the education of mothers plays a fundamental role in reducing chronic infant malnutrition in our countries (ECLAC and other agencies, 2008).² And education has been proven to have a direct bearing on the reduction of discriminatory attitudes in research carried out in Mexico (Széleky, 2006).

Admittedly, for centuries schooling has furthered discrimination against some groups by others, on account of gender, ethnicity, income level or on other grounds. That is why we agree with Fernando Savater³ that to universalize education entails putting an end to such discriminatory practices. Instead, education should enable people to demonstrate what they are capable of doing or being –through their own skills and endeavours and with the backing of sound schooling– regardless of the destiny currently envisaged for them at birth in light

¹ UNESCO Future Forum: The special needs of medium-income countries in the context of development, Montevideo, 10 December 2009.

² *Millennium Development Goals: progress towards the right to health in Latin America and the Caribbean* (LC/G.2364), Santiago, Chile, 2008.

³ Fernando Savater (1997), *El valor de educar*, Instituto de estudios educativos y sindicales de América Latina, (IEESA), Mexico City, p. 165.

of the unequal opportunities prevailing in our societies. In this regard, as Savater said, the effort to educate is always rebellion against destiny, insurrection against fate: education is *anti-fatalism*, not programmed accommodation to it.

This is why access to education is a recognized right in many of the wide-ranging international treaties and agreements in which the United Nations has played a pivotal role. Some of these agreements were crafted within the United Nations itself and have served as models for others born in other forums.

They speak of the right to free education and the obligatory nature of schooling; they underscore principles of non-discrimination; and they usually set binding standards for matters such as the years of schooling provided, the age groups covered and, more recently, quality and choice. Most of these international or regional agreements are legally binding, which means they can be duly enforced (ECLAC and Organization of Ibero-American States, OEI, 2009).

Included among the treaties, agreements and meetings that address the right to education are: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1962); the American Convention on Human Rights (1969); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976); the Protocol of San Salvador (1988); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the framework for action of the World Conference on Education for All (1990); the Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (1995); the Plan of Action of the Second Summit of the Americas (1998); Dakar Framework for Action: Education For All (Dakar, 2000); the targets of the second Millennium Development Goal for the year 2015; the Regional Project for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (PRELAC) (2002); the third Meeting of Ministers of Education of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (2004); the Plan of Action of the Fourth Summit of the Americas (2005); the International Convention of the Ibero-American Charter on the Rights of Youth (2008); and the Ibero-American Youth Cooperation and Integration Plan (2009-2015).

In terms of social cohesion, education has made some progress in Latin America and the Caribbean, but still has some important assignments pending.

It is important to point out that the lowest-income groups have benefited the most from the general advances seen in coverage and access. Now that primary education is offered across the board, school-age children have almost universal access (97%). From 1990 to 2005, access of students of middle- and high-school age also improved substantially, as did access for students of post-high school age. The net attendance rate for primary school children improved from 45% to 69%. For middle- and high-school students, attendance rose from 27% to 47%, and for students of post-high-school age, from 11% to 19%. The

main beneficiaries of improved access to primary school were children of parents with low levels of education. The percentage of students finishing high school also rose but, as a group, those whose parents have low levels of schooling lagged behind the others. Moreover, no improvements were registered for higher education. Although the number of graduates increased, the correlation between years of schooling completed and the educational environment at home remained unchanged. It is disconcerting that Latin American social structures are still so rigid; social mobility continues to be difficult because now, as completion of primary and secondary school becomes more universal, the relative value of these educational achievements diminishes.⁴

Although the fact that enrolment rates rose so quickly narrowed the gap in access to education between different social groups, it has also tended to depreciate the added educational capital of young people. The rapid increase in demand for specific knowledge and skills to perform highly technical work has only exacerbated the situation. Combined with the insufficient creation of quality jobs, this has prevented improvements in the level of education of the population from translating into improved income distribution (ECLAC, 2007).⁵

The socio-economic and educational level of parents and the material situation of the household are the two external factors that most influence academic achievement in Latin America. Education systems can counteract the weight of these external factors and tackle social segregation head on by providing schools with the teaching materials and equipment needed to adequately impart learning.

But the segregation inherent in education today, rather than countering these factors, reinforces them. Children whose parents have higher incomes are in private schools that have more resources, and school communities that mirror the socio-economic status of parents are far more common in the region than in developed countries, especially among the highest socio-economic strata, except in Argentina, where this tendency is most evident among the poorest segments (ECLAC, 2007).

In the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a student from a high-income background is five times more likely to be enrolled in a top-quality school, in Latin America the probability is 10 to 1, and in Chile and Peru, almost 20 to 1. Not only are the educational gaps between rich and poor being reproduced in the microcosm of society that schools have become, all sense of belonging and social integration are being eroded as well. As we can see, educational segregation is a task that the medium-income countries in the region need to tackle as well (ECLAC, 2007).

⁴ See Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2007* (LC/G.2351-P), Santiago, Chile, 2008. United Nations publication, Sales No.E.07.II.G.124.

⁵ ECLAC, *Social Cohesion: Inclusion and a Sense of Belonging in Latin America and the Caribbean* (LC/G.2335), Santiago, Chile, 2007.

In addition to raising the population's level of education, one of region's most daunting challenges is delivering quality education.⁶ Standardized international tests reveal worrying shortfalls in the mastery of basic skills, such as mathematics and language.

The most recent data on academic performance in the region come from a study by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in 2006, which was administered by OECD, and the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE), conducted by the UNESCO Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education. The PISA study assesses basic competence acquisition in the areas of science, mathematics and language among 15-year-old students. In 2006, six countries of the region participated in the study: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay. Sixteen Latin American countries participated in the SERCE study, which also measures basic competencies in the same areas, but among third- and sixth-grade students.

Despite the age differences between the groups included in the studies, the results of both assessments are relatively consistent, and the six Latin American countries that participated in the PISA study scored higher than the other countries of the region (except for Cuba and Costa Rica). Both assessments reveal considerable underperformance in these basic skills among a high percentage of the student population. Also the difference between the PISA scores for the countries of Latin America and the OECD average was significantly large.

The Latin American countries participating in the PISA assessment included some of those with the best academic achievement ratings in the region. Still, between 40% and 60% of the Latin American students assessed in the study obtained troubling scores, failing to achieve the minimum performance levels considered indispensable for young people to participate as citizens in academic, social and professional life, especially in mathematics. For the OECD countries, the corresponding proportion is close to 20%. In Brazil and Colombia, about 70% of young people do not have the ability to make functional use of mathematics skills and knowledge in their daily lives. With the SERCE assessment producing relatively similar findings, the conclusion to be drawn is that academic performance levels need to be raised throughout the region.

There are other types of segregation in education in the region that affect not only students from poorer countries, but those from medium-income ones as well. The breakdown of educational performance results by gender reveals widely different situations at the country level in the region. In Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay, there seem to be no significant differences in the performance of girls and boys, according to the SERCE 2006 assessment. But in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru, there are indeed significant differences with boys outperforming girls in mathematical skills. The exception is the Dominican

⁶ These concepts have been drawn from ECLAC and the Ibero-American Bureau of Education (OEI), *Metas educativas 2021: estudio de costos*, August 2009.

Republic, where the difference is the other way round, with third-grade girls performing better than boys in mathematics. The difference in the results obtained in rural and urban areas is also quite evident in the region: in almost every country pupils who attend school in urban areas perform significantly better than those who attend school in rural areas.

The advances in universalizing primary school education and the partial progress in expanding secondary school coverage underscore the differentiating role that quality in education now plays in ensuring whether young people can get into college or university education or access to adequate and better-paid jobs. It is crucial that action is taken to end the current educational divide.

There is not enough time even to mention all the elements involved in this. For example, low wages and inadequate performance incentives for teachers can have a negative impact on educational achievement. Although most teachers are not poor, their income levels do not allow them to further their own professional development or to aspire to higher standards of living, which discourages teachers from upgrading or perfecting their skills and puts people off choosing teaching as a career. A teacher's commitment to the profession can be built up or eroded by other aspects of the job as well, such as materials and equipment, school administration and leadership, the abilities and motivation of the pupils, and the school environment.

Another challenge, one which complements efforts to increase coverage and continuity in education, is ensuring universal access for children between the ages of three and six to quality pre-school education, which contributes to their overall development and, indirectly, improves school performance in the primary years (ECLAC and UNESCO, 2005).⁷ It is important to point out that quality pre-school education also has repercussions on the care economy, which is largely in the hands of women, and can help reduce the discrimination women currently face in the labour market as well as increase society's shouldering of responsibility for the provision of care.

The relationship between education and social cohesion is multifaceted. Education is key to reducing poverty, preparing young people for civic engagement, protecting more socially vulnerable groups and promoting greater equity in access to opportunities. On the socio-political front, education can help strengthen democracy, given that the material and symbolic foundations of democracies rest on the broad application of knowledge, information and communication. Being a citizen does not mean merely having political, civil and social rights; it also means enjoying equal footing when participating in exchanges of communication, cultural consumption, the handling of information

7 ECLAC/UNESCO, "Investing better in order to invest more. Finance and management of education in Latin America and the Caribbean", *Seminarios y conferencias series*, No. 43 (LC/L.2246-P/E), Santiago, Chile, 2005. United Nations publication, Sales No.E.05.II.G.4.

and access to public forums (CEPAL, 2007). In light of the educational shortfalls detected even in the medium-income countries of the region, making progress in these areas will be a challenge indeed.