



# A New Context for Teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean

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## **A New Context for Teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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**April 2012**

### **Abstract**

School attendance in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has increased exponentially in the last two decades, almost every child goes to primary school and access to preschool and high school is fast catching up. This increase in access has been mostly led by more attendance to school of previously excluded children and youth -poor, rural and indigenous populations-, which has created a heterogeneous pool of students with very diverse needs, abilities and interests. These changes impose new challenges and roles for teachers aiming to improve the quality of learning. Under this new pool of students teachers should be able to *compensate* for the different abilities that students come to class with to achieve similar and better learning for all students; they should be capable of *containing* students that come to class with diverse problems – violence, discrimination, teenage pregnancy-; and, finally, they should be skilled to *facilitate* the transition from school to work by equipping students with the skills needed to succeed in the labor market. Based on descriptive statistics on increased access to education and some learning and life outcomes, we discuss in detail how the three new roles called upon teachers can help improve the quality of education in LAC. Finally, we conclude with some promising examples on how countries and international organizations are attempting to create a teaching force that can fulfill these roles.

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## 1. More and a more diverse group of children and youth are in school

In the last two decades, Latin America and the Caribbean have significantly increased school attendance among children and youth, in particular for disadvantage groups of population previously excluded from the school system. The most significant increase in attendance can be seen in preschool and high school, at both ends of the school cycle. Children are entering school younger and youth are staying in school longer. Attendance to preschool escalated from 30% in the early nineties to more than 50% nowadays. Among secondary school aged youth, attendance increased from 70% to more than 80%, even though a large percentage (approximately 20%) of these students is still attending primary education<sup>2</sup>. Increased attendance in preschool and secondary education requires teachers with skills tailored to the specific needs of these two levels of education.

One of the most interesting facts of increased attendance in preschool and high school is that the trend is lead by poor, rural and ethnic minorities that are participating in the school system more than ever before. In the last twenty years, attendance to school among all preschool aged children increased by 21%, but this increase was more pronounced among poor and rural children increasing attendance by 23% and 27% respectively. This means that nowadays, almost half of poor and rural preschool age children attend this level compared to a mere twenty percent in the early 90s. Among secondary school aged youth, participation in the school system has increased by 12% in the last twenty years, and in this segment of the population the growth in participation has also been much more important for the poor (15%) and rural (22%)<sup>3</sup> (Graph 1). Among ethnic minorities, the participation in the school system has evolved from almost nonexistent twenty years ago to 70% in primary school aged children and 50% in secondary school aged youth<sup>4</sup>. The increased participation of these previously excluded groups changes the composition and increases the heterogeneity of the group of students. The main challenge that this heterogeneous groups of students brings to the classroom is the increased mix of needs, abilities, family background, languages and culture that one same teacher has to work with.

With children entering school earlier, teachers specialized in early childhood development (ECD) are needed. For preschoolers, numerous studies have found that both the level of education and specialized training in ECD predict children's learning and development (see Barnett, 2004 on the United

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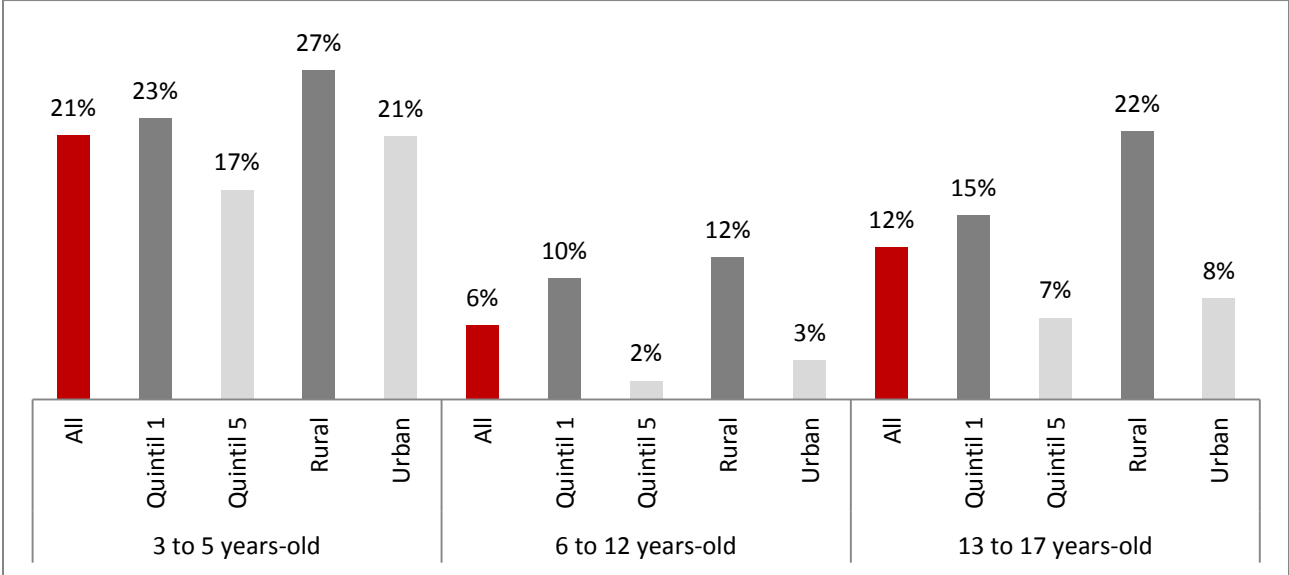
<sup>2</sup> Authors' calculations based on household surveys processed by SEDLAC.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

States; Sylva et al., 2003 on the EPPE program in United Kingdom, Loeb, et al., 2003, Bogard, et al, 2008, Harvard Family Research Project, 2006). With youngsters staying longer at school, there is an increased demand for teachers at the high school level and a call for teachers to be capable of equipping students with the skills they will need to succeed in their future life, either in the labor market or in higher education. Teachers should be able to provide students with the skills demanded by the labor market in Latin America including both knowledge skills – language, communication and critical thinking- as well as behavioral skills –responsibility, engagement and customer service– (Bassi, Busso, Urzúa, & Vargas, 2012). Needless to say, it’s imperative that teachers themselves are equipped with these skills in order to be able to teach them.

**Graph 1. Change in percentage points in the share of a given population attending any educational level by income and area. Early 1990s versus late 2000s**



Source: Authors’ calculations based on household surveys processed by SEDLAC.

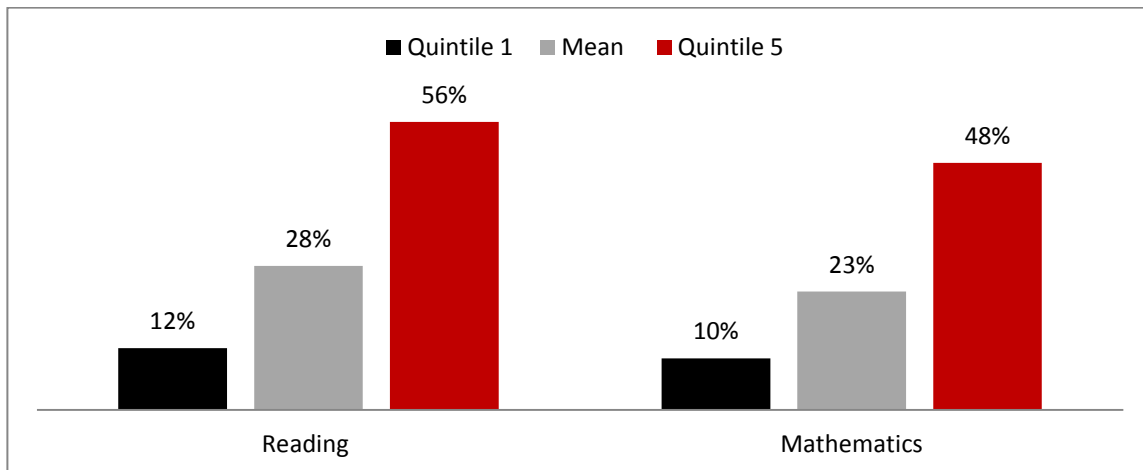
**2. Three roles for teachers: compensate, contain and facilitate**

The new pool of students that includes, more than ever, poor, rural and ethnic population as well younger children and more youngsters, calls for new roles and skills for teachers. Teachers need to be able to compensate for the different abilities with which students come to class, contain youth at risk and children that come to class with violent behavior and from disadvantage family environments, and facilitate the transitions throughout the school trajectory and from school to higher studies or work equipping students with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

a. Compensate

Latin American students show a high level of inequality in their learning based in the socioeconomic background of the families they belong to. Students that come from rich families perform better in school than those that come from poor families as measured by their results in international standardized tests. In fact, the socioeconomic background of the students is one of the principal factors that explains variability in the results of these tests. The probability that a third grade student from the richest quintile gets a satisfactory score in reading in the SERCE test is 57%, compared to 12% for a student from the poorest quintile, in mathematics the difference is 48% to 10% (Duarte, Bos, & Moreno, 2010) (Graph 2). These results are in line with results from analysis in other regions of the world, based on PISA 2006 we know that home background is one of the most powerful factors influencing student performance explaining on average 14.4% of student performance in science in OECD countries (OECD, 2007). Because the socioeconomic background of a student has a strong association with their learning, teachers have the unique role of compensating for the disadvantage that these students come to school with and be able to close the gap in learning with more affluent students. A survey of lower secondary teachers in OECD countries reveals that 15% of them report a high level of need of training on teaching in a multicultural setting (OECD, 2009) showing a significant gap between skills needed and the ones they have to teach disadvantage students. We can only assume that in Latin America the gap is at least the same, if not larger.

**Graph 2 Probability of obtaining a satisfactory score in SERCE 2006 - Third grade**



Source: Duarte, Bos y Moreno, 2010

Striking disparities in what children from different socioeconomic backgrounds know and can do are evident before they enter school, and these disparities predict academic performance throughout their school trajectory and life achievement (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). The gap in cognitive skills and social behaviors with which children enter school tend to expand as they progress through school (Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Head Start, 2005). Thus, the more unprepared a child is upon entering school the further back she or he will fall as achievement gaps widen over the course of formal schooling. Children from poor families disproportionately enter primary school less ready to learn and to make appropriate progress throughout their formal school trajectory. Poverty places constraints on the abilities of families to invest in material resources (e.g., books) necessary for cognitive and language development (Dearing et al., 2009). It thus comes as little surprise that children from adverse socioeconomic backgrounds tend to achieve less in school, repeat more, and eventually drop out.

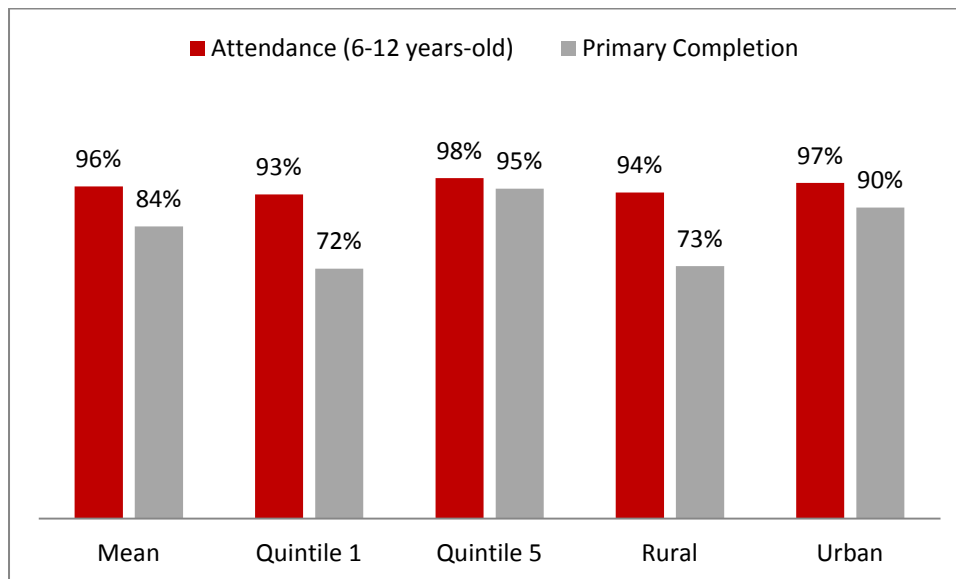
Also important is the inequity observed in poor and rural children in terms of internal efficiency. Poor and rural children tend to repeat grades more often taking longer to complete primary education and they tend to abandon school prematurely. Even though 93% of the poorest children in primary age attend school, only 72% complete this level. This difference is much smaller among the richest students (98% vs. 95%). The same is true for rural students, while 94% attend primary school, only 73% complete this level, and again this difference is much larger than in urban areas (97% vs. 90%) (Graph 3). This shows that among the more disadvantage populations, internal inefficiencies – grade repetition, overage and drop out- are more prevalent and lead to lower levels of education among these groups. At the secondary level the problem of dropout becomes even more prevalent, youth that are in high school and have a history of grade repetition and overage, have higher chances of abandoning school. These problems are predominant among poor and rural youth. Only half of poor secondary aged youth attend high school, 20% are still in primary school and 30% dropped out of school, compared to 80% attending high school, 10% still in primary and only 10% dropout among the richest youth<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Authors' calculations based on household surveys processed by SEDLAC.*



**Graph 3. Attendance versus completion of primary school by income and area**



*Source: authors based on household surveys processed by SEDLAC.*

High dropout rates are a major concern throughout the world. According to UNICEF, just in the United States, 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year. Latin America does not tell a different story. Several studies try to explain the main determinants of drop out from school and find that it varies from developed to developing countries. While in the developed world the main drivers for dropout are drug use, alcohol consumption when controlling for confounding factors as socioeconomic status, gender, among others (Chatterji & DeSimone, 2005), (Roebuck, French, & Dennis, 2004), in developing countries there is a more significant effect of the trade-off between school and the labor market (Cardoso & Verner, 2006) and lack of interest in the contents taught. This can be seen in the case of Honduras, where according to the 2009's household surveys 40% of the youths between 13 to 17 years old that are not attending to the secondary school argued that they cannot go to school because they have to work or because they did not have the enough money to pay for school and 36.5% answered that they did not want to study because they are not interested in school. A similar story can be seen in Guatemala, where 66% of the children that left the primary school at fifth grade, which are predominantly from the poorest groups of population, did it because they needed to work. For youths between 13 to 17, 40% left school because they have to work or they lack money to attend school, while 32 % left the school because they lack interest in it<sup>6</sup>. Teachers, therefore, face yet another challenge of

<sup>6</sup> Author's calculations based on household surveys.

improving the school trajectory of these disadvantaged students and retaining them in school. Schools not only need to teach the adequate abilities to success in future life but they need to do it in a way to keep students interested in staying in school. Further reforms- scholarships, cash transfers, for example-are also needed to complement these actions and take money considerations out of the decision to attend school.

b. *Contain*

With increased coverage, not only the number of students increased, but also the diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds, family dynamics personalities and personal problems that teachers face daily in their classrooms. At the same time, children and youth are exposed to a society filled with violence and discrimination. The social and economic reality where the vast majority of Latin-American schools function is plagued with extreme poverty, racial and sexual violence, discrimination, alcoholism, drug addiction, gang activity, among others. Violence and discrimination negatively affects learning, primary students exposed to these two factors show lower results in international standardized tests (SERCE) (Duarte, Bos, & Moreno, 2010). Of particular concern is half of all youngsters in the Latin America who are considered to be at risk (Cunningham, McGinnis, García, & Verner, 2008), these are young people that engage in behaviors that are harmful for themselves and society, like leaving school early, being jobless and not at school, behaving violently, engaging in drug abuse or initiating sex at young age. Even though all these behaviors represent a serious risk for the youths and the society, violence is the one with more severe long run consequences.

Violence is widespread in Latin-American countries. Although the continent is familiarized with several ways of political violence, since the middle 80's a new violence phenomena jumped into scene. Drug trafficking and gangs have made their way into the youth population exposing them to an uncertain life without real opportunities to progress (Cunningham, McGinnis, García, & Verner, 2008), (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002) (Jones & Rodgers, 2009)). Latin-American youth are exposed to an extremely violent social context, more so than many other regions of the world. In the past years, the region has been considered as the most violent region for youth, especially, Central America. LAC has the highest homicide rate of young men in the world (sixty-nine per one hundred thousand inhabitants) and a large presence of gangs in the society. In Honduras, for example, five percent of the entire male population aged fifteen to twenty-four are gang members (UNODC, 2007); in El Salvador, more than ninety percent of the homicide victims are between fifteen to seventeen years old (Jones & Rodgers,

2009) and sixty percent of the homicides were committed by youth. Examining data from household surveys of Guatemala it is possible to argue that gang violence has had a negative impact in school attainment, especially in the lower quintiles of the population. In 2006, seventeen percent of the children in the poorest quintile that left the school at fifth grade did it because the effect of violence or the harassment of local gangs or *maras*. Situations like this illustrate how violence is not far from schools and reaches teachers and students equally. In Brazil, from a sample of one 147 thousand students in one 143 schools; eighty-four percent of the students perceived their school as violent. In the same survey, seventy percent admitted being victims of violence in the school (Abramovay & Das Graças, 2005). In Colombia, in the first three months of 2010, more than a thousand students were displaced from their neighborhoods in Medellin and forced to dropout from school by local drug trafficking gangs (CODHES, 2010). Also in Colombia, between 2007 and 2009 more than four hundred death threats, two hundred displacements and fifty murders have been committed against unionized and non-unionized teachers (Unesco, 2010).

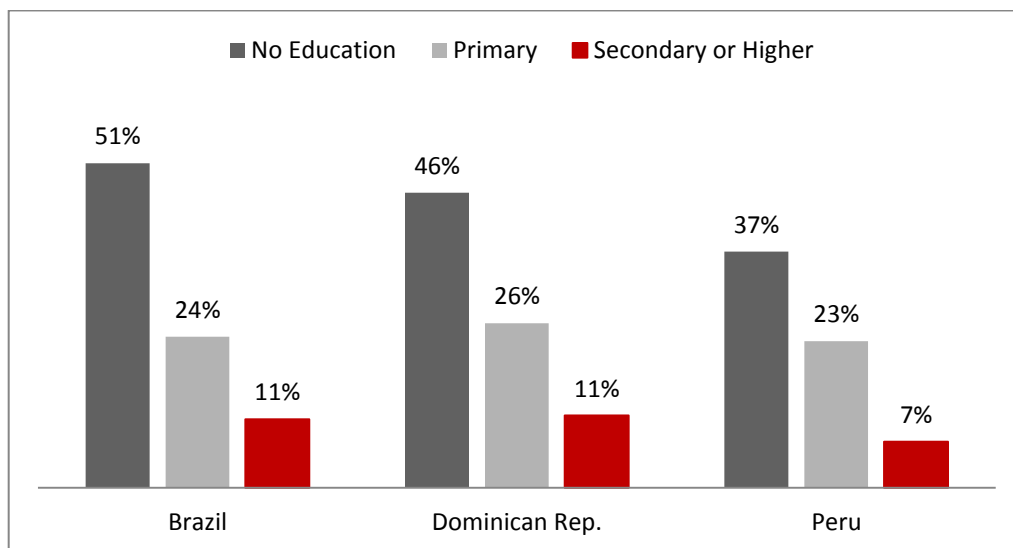
Violence is not only against school or school members but also within schools. In Kingston, Jamaica, twenty-one percent of the surveyed students of eleven schools admitted had attacked some teachers and the same percentage admitted had suffered violence from other students (Gardner, Powell, Thomas, & Millard, 2003). In Nicaragua, forty-five percent of six thousand students surveyed have suffered bullying in primary school; while in secondary, this percentage raises to fifty percent (MECD, 2003).

Long-term consequences of experimenting violence against school or within school are profoundly serious. The UNESCO affirmed in his report of 2010 that *"If schools in an area are repeatedly attacked, children most likely will be afraid to go to school, parents will be afraid to send them and teachers will be afraid to go to school"* (Unesco, 2010). The Inter Inter-American Development Bank described how there is a strong relationship between truancy and school drop-out (IDB, 2004); and the United Nations recognized that schools are the natural place to construct the social cohesion needed to contain the youths to dropout schools and to be part of violent activities (Pinheiro, 2006). Teachers with the necessary tools to promote non-violent and non-discriminatory attitudes and behaviors are needed.

Another important factor affecting youth attendance to school is early sexual initiation. Sexually transmitted diseases and early parenthood are some of the possible outcomes of this behavior. As Cardoso and Verner (2006) founds in a sample for Brazil, early parenthood increases by 0.46 the

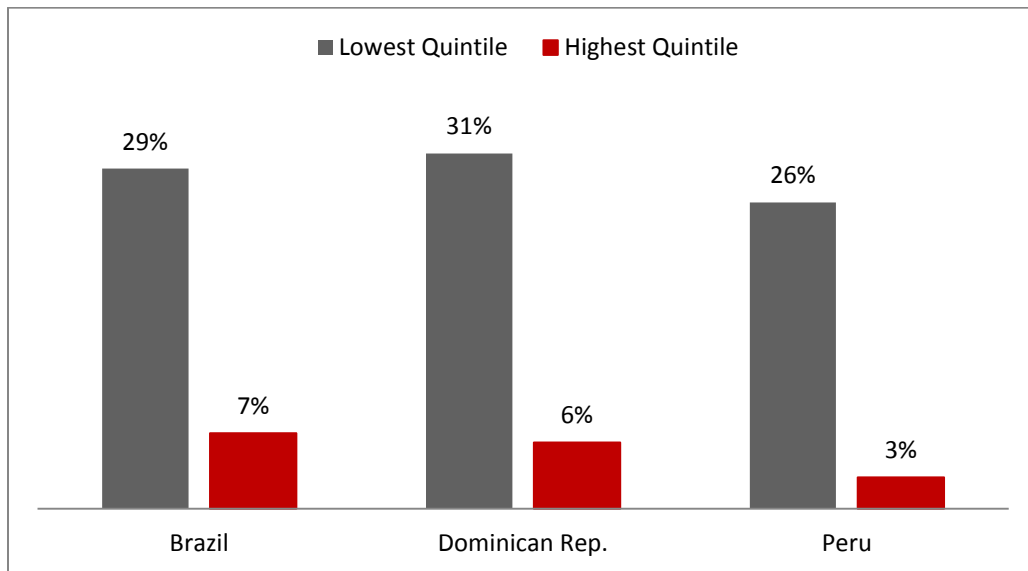
probability that a teenager drops out of school. Early pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean occurs mainly in poor, non-educated youth women. Data collected in the Demographic and Health Surveys shows how girls between fifteen and seventeen years in the lowest income quintile and with lowest levels of schooling are more likely to become pregnant. For example, in Brazil 50% of the young women who report having no education are pregnant compared to less than 10% among those that have secondary or higher education. Similar differences are observed between income levels and urban and rural areas (Graph 4 and 5). A new set of public policies oriented to reduce early parenthood and risky sexual behaviors are needed, especially in schools where youths that are more exposed to risk factors spend most of their time (Pinheiro, 2009). In Latin America there is a severe lack of schools programs and curriculums that help to prevent risky sexual behaviors. According to the 2008 Report on the Global Aid Epidemic (UNAIDS, 2008), less than one percent of the schools in Dominican Republic have provided life skills-based HIV education in 2007. Although there are some better numbers for other countries in the region, they are still low. For example, in Mexico and Jamaica, less than thirty percent of the schools have sexual education curriculums. Teachers and school have a major role helping to prevent early and unsafe sexual initiation, early parenthood, and sexually transmitted diseases. Teachers must guide their students in order to get and understand all the necessary information to initiate and maintain a healthy sex life. Preventing students to engage in risky sexual behaviors has positive effects on school dropout rates.

**Graph 4. Percentage of 15-19 year old women who are mothers or pregnant with their first child by education level**



Source: Macro International Inc, 2010 based on Demographic and Health Survey, 1998- 2007

**Graph 5. Percentage of 15-19 year old women who are mothers or pregnant with their first child by income quintile**



*Source: Macro International Inc, 2010 based on Demographic and Health Survey, 1998- 2007*

The situation of discrimination, violence and early parenthood has transformed the role of schools and, mainly teachers. Teachers are not only a source of academic formation, but also promoters of cohesion and social encounter. Schools and teachers now have the additional role of containing students, helping them lead and overcome the personal problems they face outside school, in order to create a fruitful learning environment.

*c. Facilitate*

One the roles called upon teachers is to facilitate the transitions into school and out of school. That is to say, given the large number of students now entering preschool, teachers have the role to provide quality early childhood education to facilitate the transition into formal education and increase the chances of a successful school trajectory. At the other end of the school life, teachers have the role to facilitate the transition from school to adult life, providing the students with the skills they need to succeed in the labor market or higher studies.

The earliest years of life are critical in shaping the architecture of the brain and creating the foundation upon which future learning, behavior and health depend. The more unprepared a child is upon entering school the further back she or he will fall as achievement gaps widen over the course of

formal schooling (Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Head Start, 2005). There are striking disparities in what children know and can do before they enter school, and these disparities are predictive of subsequent academic performance and life achievement (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Children from poor families disproportionately enter primary school less ready to learn and to make appropriate progress as they age. Poverty places constraints on the abilities of families to invest in material resources (e.g., books) necessary for cognitive and language development (Dearing et al., 2009). Even before entering kindergarten, average cognitive scores of children from the highest socioeconomic group are 60 percent above those of children from the lowest socioeconomic one, and is largely associated with more language-rich and positive home environments (Education Week, 2007). Children in less enriched settings tend to achieve less in school, repeat more, and eventually drop out. Given the large number of poor, rural and indigenous children entering early childhood education nowadays and that intervening at this level has the greatest potential of mitigating disparities and to have a successful school life, it's increasingly important to have qualified teachers at this level that can facilitate the transition to formal schooling.

At the other end of school life, teachers have the challenging role of facilitating this transition from school to higher studies or work by equipping students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Cognitive skills—rather than mere school attainment—are strongly related to individual earnings, the distribution of income, and economic growth (Hanushek & Woessman, 2008). Furthermore, labor markets throughout the world have become increasingly selective in the set of skills they demand from its workers, with non-routine/non-cognitive skills – such as complex communication and expert thinking- demand on the rise (Levy, Murnane, & Autor, 2003). Latin America is no exception to this global trend, a survey conducted by the IDB to 1107 firms located in Argentina, Chile and Brazil found that demand for workers with behavioral skills - responsibility, engagement, team work and customer service - is relatively higher than cognitive and sector specific skills. The catch is these Latin American firms are also reporting that they are finding great difficulties in recruiting young workers with these skills (Bassi, Busso, Urzúa, & Vargas, 2012). Analysis of household survey show the precarious labor market situation that young adults face in Latin America: unemployment among youth is three times higher than those of adults, one in four youngsters don't work or study, an important percentage of employment for the youth is in the informal sector and job rotation is high. But more importantly, all these unfavorable labor market conditions are steeper for youth with less education (Bassi & Galiani, 2008). A detailed analysis of Chilean youth reveals that less educated laborers face longer unemployment before finding their first job and that more education guarantees higher salaries, even though the biggest jump in salary is seen when completing

higher education (Bassi & Galiani, 2009). These results showcase the critical role of the education system, particularly at the secondary level, in graduating students equipped with the skills that will enable them to excel both in the labor market and in further education.

At the same time, information and communication technologies are becoming increasingly center stage in the daily lives of students and the learning and working environment. These technologies not only facilitate teaching and are needed to excel in the labor market but also provide a common and generational compatible language between students and teachers. As a result, literacy on their use is a crucial outcome of today's formal education. Teachers face the unique challenge of providing students with these skills in order to facilitate the transition from school to the labor market. A survey of teachers in the OECD countries showed that 25 percent of the teachers think that they have a high level of need of training in "Information and Communication Technology teaching skills", and most importantly, a need of constant training to catch up with the fast evolution and development of new technologies (OECD, 2009). Furthermore, teachers perceive that ICT skills are useful to improve the learning experience. The use of ICT offers new opportunities to improve the way knowledge is constructed and new forms to access it. But in order to exploit them, new learning practices, methodologies, and training should be provided to teachers (Cabrol & Severin, 2009).

### **3. Creating a teaching force that can fulfill these roles**

#### **a. Compensate**

This role calls for teachers to be able to assess and understand the different skills and abilities that children come to the classroom with and be able to teach differentially so that all students can learn equally. It's important to note that equity does not mean equality, teachers need to be able to differentiate among students' different learning needs and teach tailored to those needs so that all students can have the possibility of achieving similar and higher learning.

One of the best examples of how to assure higher quality of learning for all students regardless of their socioeconomic background is the innovative allocation of resources and differentiated instruction accomplished in the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in the state of Maryland in the United States. MCPS serves one hundred and forty seven thousand students from all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. When a new administration assumed more than a decade ago, a new

approach was adopted based on a principle of equitable education consisting mainly of higher and common standards and focused resource allocation and differentiated instruction. Focused resource allocation meant that more resources (monetary and non-monetary) are going to those schools that were underperforming. That basically meant that the resources were going to the poorest and needed because these were precisely the schools with worst performance. The main idea behind this new approach was acknowledging that performance in the worst schools of the district was a problem of resources, time and more rigorous standards. In terms of differentiated instruction, the strategy of MCPS was based on the assumption that every child can meet rigorous standards, but each child starts from a different place. Acknowledging the central role of teachers in their strategy, the county invested heavily in training teachers to be able to deliver a rigorous curriculum in ways that allow students of different readiness levels to succeed. Differentiated instruction entails teachers to diagnose students' needs, develop potential solutions, put them into practice and reflect on their effectiveness. Since the implementation of this strategy, the county has been consistently improving the main indicators of education success for all their students. Success of MCPS can be measured by its own results. While in 2002, fifty-two percent of all kindergarten students were able to read. In 2008, after all the school reforms, ninety-three percent could do so at a level even higher than the previous standard (Childress & Thomas, 2009).

Another successful story in effective compensatory policies is the transformations carried out in Finland's educational system that made its educational system the more successful and equitable system in the OECD. Since 1970, a series of policies were implemented in order to get a system that combines equity, quality and high rates of participation (Sahlberg, 2009). Before these policies took effect, Finland's educational system had a wide achievement gap among its students strongly correlated to socioeconomic status. Reforms were inspired in an ideal of a system that could meet the needs of all students regardless of genre, race or academic skills. Darling-Hammond (2010) summarized the main ideas behind the reforms as: (i) Resources for those who need them most; (ii) High Standards and supports for special needs; (iii) Qualified Teachers; (iv) Evaluation of Education; and (v) Balancing decentralization and centralization. In order to compensate for those who were in a more vulnerable situation, whether it was because of their lack of academic formation or because its socioeconomic situation, the Finnish Education system taught their teachers how to help the students that were underperforming, and by this way, taught them how to teach for all kind of students. Likewise, an important amount of resources were directed to those schools that needed them most. So, the system



ensures that the people that were struggling receive the type of support and education they needed. Nowadays, Finland performance in all international assessments surpasses all other countries in the world and it has become the best performing country (OECD, 2007).

b. Contain

The second new role calls for teachers to contain children and youth coming to school with risk factors-history of violence, risky sexual behavior, drugs addiction, among others- and create a safe learning environment, with differentiated teaching according to the reality and needs of each student and provide a relevant education that will keep students in school. Students engaged in risky behaviors need to find in education an alternative path out to their difficult reality, and teachers are at the core of this strategy being in direct contact with these students. Youth that stay in school longer – and only a relevant education can keep students in school – show lower gang related activity, lower chances of teen pregnancy and drug addiction.

Many international organizations have been recommending several programs about how to teach children and youth at risk, especially to those who are involved in a violent and poor environment. However, a lack of ex-post evaluations is evident in the literature. More research on the effectiveness of programs to contain youth at risk is needed. Here is key the generation and dissemination of evidence on successful programs and policies for the positive development of at-risk youth, including alternative, remedial, and compensatory interventions aimed at preventing dropout or paving the way for dropouts' return to the education system.

There are some promising approaches focused on the creation of a positive classroom environment to promote learning for all children, children's self-control and self-discipline, to foster students' sense of ownership and connection with their school, to transmit the importance of the school in the long run, and to teach an human-rights approach that guarantees a non-violent, non-discriminatory education (Unesco, 2009) (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004) (Itsuno, 1993). In order to create this positive classroom environment, several factors appear to be highly relevant in teachers' training. First, according to UNESCO (2009), a human-rights based education is mandatory in order to shape the values needed to create awareness about the importance of respecting life, expressions and freedom of others. This should be implemented from preschool, and teachers must be trained in this field to guarantee that they constitute a role example of what they are teaching. Secondly, according to the results from the 2008's TALIS Exam *"teachers with "constructivist" beliefs about teaching are more*

*likely to report good classroom disciplinary climate”* (OECD, 2009, p. 220). Constructive discipline techniques such as keeping classroom rules positive, instructive and brief; use positive reinforcement; and the use of disciplinary measures that are educative and no punitive have been recommended by the UNESCO (2009) to improve the classroom climate. Likewise, empathy it is also important. It makes the dialogue between teachers and students easy. It helps teacher to understand children and youths behavior and to perceive more personally their relational needs (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004).

### c. Facilitate

The final role requires teachers to facilitate transitions throughout the school trajectory and from school to adult life. Teachers should provide students with the skills and abilities to enter and succeed in school life by offering quality early childhood education (ECD) and exit school and succeed in adult life by equipping students with the skills demanded by the labor market and higher studies.

In early childhood education, better prepared teachers and caregivers use larger vocabularies with children, communicate more clearly, have stronger abilities to construct and individualize lesson plans, and more effectively problem solve when confronted with any number of challenges in the classroom (e.g., children with learning difficulties or facing emotional stress at home). They also tend to have more positive, sensitive and responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences, encourage more sharing and cooperation between children, and are less authoritarian and detached. As a result, they produce better overall outcomes – linguistic, emotional, cognitive and social - in children. However, the field of human resources for ECD remains largely unexplored and under-evaluated, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Among the most pressing knowledge gaps are those associated with the profiles and competencies required of educators and caregivers to ensure the delivery of quality services, and cost-effective means for training ECD professionals (Verdisco & Nopo, 2010).

Successfully transitioning to adult life requires possessing skills and abilities that are up to par with those demanded in the labor market or higher studies. Teachers have the unique role of equipping students with these skills and abilities. Several countries have acknowledged this and are creating a teaching force capable of fulfilling this role. Through professional development programs, teachers can learn how to introduce 21st century skills and content into the core subjects they teach. Teachers need permanent support to incorporate new teaching strategies, classroom management practices and tools into their pedagogy. For example, in addition to traditional whole-class instruction, teachers need to

vary their teaching with differentiated instruction; flexible grouping; collaborative, inquiry- and project-based learning; and online resources to meet the needs of individual students and prepare them for the demands of the labor market. Teachers also need to be proficient in ICT literacy, so they can help students develop this proficiency. Pre-service training of teachers should move towards including 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the education of future teachers and competency in these skills should become an accreditation criterion for teacher training programs. Simultaneously, curriculum, standards and students' assessment should be aligned with these skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006).

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the last two decades, Latin America and the Caribbean have significantly increased school attendance among children and youth, in particular for disadvantage population groups, poor, rural and ethnic population, previously excluded from the school system. Children are entering school earlier and youngsters are staying longer, this means that teachers specialized in early childhood development are needed and that there is an increased demand for teachers at the high school level capable of equipping students with the skills they will need to succeed in their future life, either in the labor market or in higher education.

The new pool of students that includes more than ever children and youth coming from disadvantage backgrounds, plus the challenges imposed by the XXI century globalized world, requires that Latin American teachers perform three roles in order to improve the quality of learning. These new roles are to *compensate*, for the different abilities with which students come to class, to *contain* youth at risk and children that come to class with violent behavior and from disadvantage family environments; and to *facilitate* transitions throughout the school trajectory and from school to adult life.

Helping teachers acquire the skills necessary to fulfill these three roles requires the strengthening of in-service training programs so that teachers can reinforce and continuously update their knowledge, skills, competencies, and pedagogical practices and approaches for serving students with various learning needs in various social and risk situations. Also, teaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills requires knowing exactly which these abilities are and how to measure them. National evaluation systems should incorporate the measurement of competencies and cognitive and non-cognitive skills and promote longitudinal studies to help examine and analyze impacts throughout the life cycle, which would help to create the incentives needed to teach them.

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