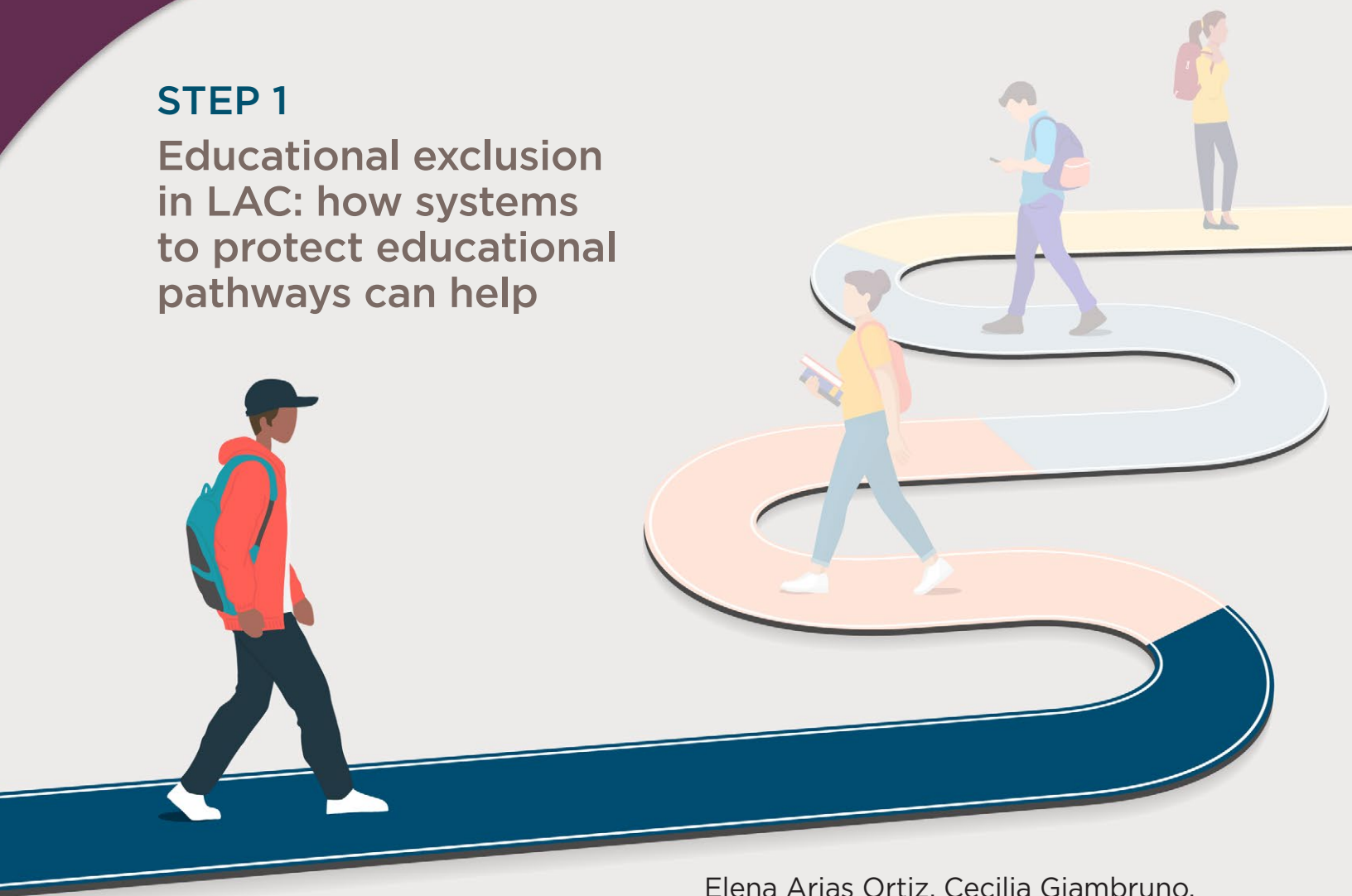


THE ROAD TO EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION: FOUR STEPS TO DEVELOP SYSTEMS TO PROTECT EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

STEP 1

Educational exclusion
in LAC: how systems
to protect educational
pathways can help



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1 Introduction

This document is the first of four publications in the series *“The Road to educational inclusion: four steps to develop systems to protect educational pathways”*. It aims to serve as a guide for education ministries and secretariats in the region that are interested in the design and implementation of protection systems for educational pathways.

The series collates existing knowledge about the protection of students’ educational pathways in a context in which the challenge of exclusion is ever more widespread in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, educational exclusion rates in LAC were already very worrying. Added to this, it is estimated that school closures during the health crisis could have an impact that, in terms of educational exclusion, reaches more than 3 million of the region’s children and young people from preschool to tertiary level (UNESCO, 2020), affecting particularly those who are most vulnerable (Acevedo et al., 2020). This calls for a redoubling of efforts to find systemic evidence-based responses, using the new technologies available, in order to ensure that the region’s children and adolescents have a real opportunity to pursue uninterrupted and complete educational pathways, guaranteeing their right to education.

This first publication is designed to introduce protection systems for educational pathways, from their conceptualization and objectives through to their two main components: early warning systems and timely interventions and remedial strategies. It also includes a brief overview of educational exclusion in LAC, showing the urgent need to implement these systems in the region, and reviews the literature on the main factors behind student dropout. Finally, it discusses the lessons learned and presents recommendations for the implementation of systems to protect educational pathways.



2 What is a system to protect educational pathways?

Education is a fundamental process in all stages of the development of children, young people and adults. It has a direct bearing on people's well-being and quality of life, income level, health and life expectancy. Its impacts are not only individual, but also affect society as a whole since education is directly related to economic growth, cultural development and equality of opportunity. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the world has seen remarkable growth in educational coverage. In LAC, access to primary schooling has reached, on average, 97% of children between 6 and 11 years old, according to CIMA (2018).

Despite this undeniable achievement, rates of educational exclusion remain high in the region's education systems, particularly at the secondary level, generating clear disadvantages in terms of employment and life opportunities. In LAC, six out of ten over-25s have not completed higher secondary education and there are marked differences by socioeconomic level (CIMA, 2018). Among adults with a higher income level, 40% have not finished secondary school while, among the poorest adults, the figure reaches 85% (CIMA, 2018). In other words, only 15% of adults from the region's most vulnerable households have complete secondary education.

The accumulated evidence shows that it is children and young people from the poorest households who are most likely to be excluded from the education system (Cameron, 2005; Román, 2013; Rumberger, 2012; Sabates et al., 2010). Given that education systems are a fundamental lever for achieving a more equitable society, the construction of fairer and more inclusive systems that open up the same opportunities for all is a global challenge that cannot be neglected (OECD, 2010). In addition to its high economic and social costs (De Witte et al., 2013; Latif et al., 2015), educational exclusion undermines the right of millions of children and young people to education and must, therefore, be given the highest possible priority and be addressed with a sense of urgency (UNICEF, 2018).

How can the region's education systems combat exclusion? Educational exclusion is the result of a dynamic process in which different stages can be identified (Cura, 2020). Before children and young people drop out, they are in a situation known as potential exclusion, which is generally associated with a very poor quality of learning, recurrent absences and generally fragile and precarious schooling (UNICEF, 2012). To reduce the scale of the problem, education ministries can use protection systems for educational pathways, which enable them to implement timely and targeted interventions and give these children and young people a real opportunity to continue on their learning pathways. The need for these systems has become even more urgent in the context of the pandemic and the mass closure of schools around the region, which have exacerbated the gaps



that already existed in terms of learning and educational exclusion. In this context, it is essential to be able to identify the students at risk and implement effective measures to prevent their dropout.

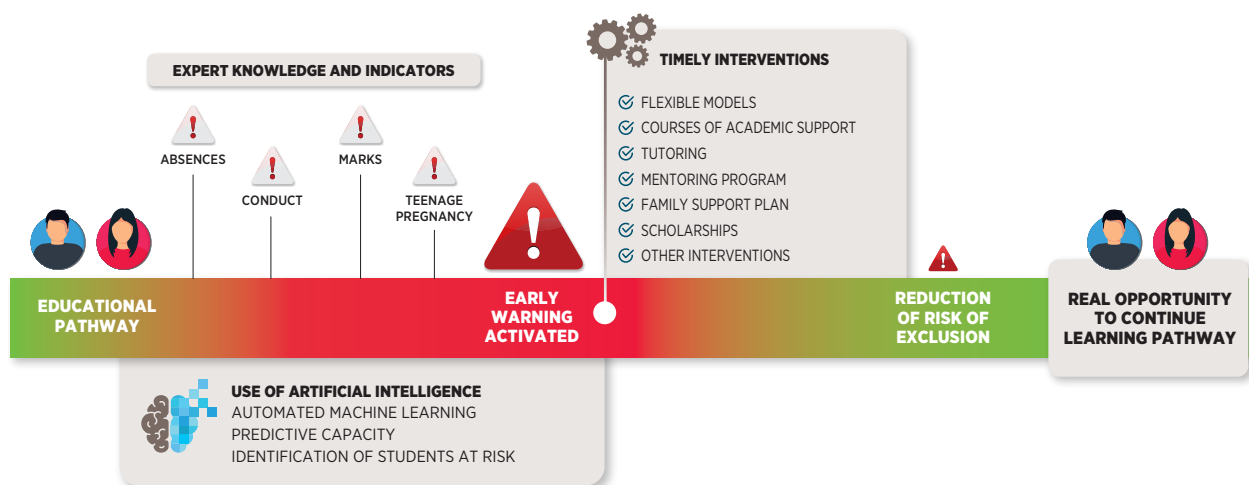
The objective of a system to protect educational pathways is to build the conditions so that the journeys of children and adolescents within the education system are continuous, complete and high-quality, reducing lags and early dropout, and generating equality of opportunities for learning and development (UNICEF, 2020: 1). These systems are usually structured around two main components: 1) detection (with early warning systems as the principal tool) and 2) timely interventions and remedial strategies. Both components are essential to achieve the objective of reducing educational exclusion.

To activate timely strategies and implement effective interventions for students or groups of students at risk of educational exclusion, early warning systems are a very good strategy. They generally operate under a logic of alerts or “red flags”, which identify indicators of risk of exclusion (UNICEF, 2018). Given that educational exclusion is the result of a long process of disconnection between the student and the system, rather than a specific event, there are clear warning signs along the way (Jimerson et al., 2000; Lamb et al., 2010; Román, 2013). If these signals are read correctly, it is possible to detect the risk before dropout occurs and, therefore, make timely decisions, preventing new exclusion processes. In other words, the key is to be able to identify the problem of exclusion before it happens.

It should be noted that the rapid technological development of recent years means that new technologies and tools are now available for use in implementing more effective and accurate early warning systems. However, a high-precision early warning system is useless if not accompanied by a set of strategies and interventions that can be deployed when a situation of risk is detected. To implement timely interventions and remedial strategies, it is, therefore, crucial to draw up protocols to guide the actors of the education system in a series of interventions, programs and/or services that must be activated in the response to situations of risk. The presence of both components is key for the effective protection of educational pathways.



FIGURE 1 ■ **DIAGRAM OF THE OPERATION OF A SYSTEM TO PROTECT EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS**



Source: Compiled by authors.

It should be noted that the policy action of a system to protect educational pathways lies in the strategies and opportune interventions that are designed and implemented to reduce educational exclusion. For their part, early warning systems, as the main instrument for diagnosing situations of risk, are the support and policy decision-making tool for the focalization of timely interventions at the school, regional and central levels.



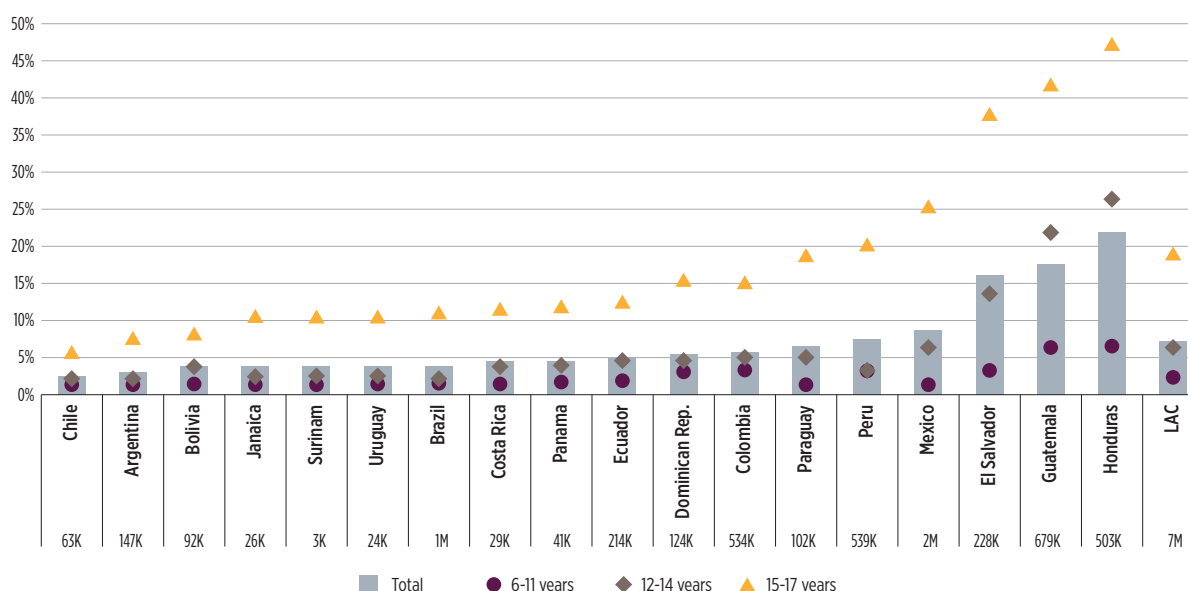
3 Why is it important? Overview of educational exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean

Before the closure of schools in response to COVID-19, 7.2% of 6-17 year-olds in LAC were not attending school. In absolute terms, this means that over 7 million children and young people were excluded from the education system (Acevedo et al., 2020). Exclusion rates varied by age, with young people aged between 15 and 17 as the most affected. On average, one in five young people (18%) aged between 15 and 17 were not attending school while, for primary school children (6-11 year-olds), the figure dropped to 2% and, in lower secondary education (12-14 year-olds), to 6% (Acevedo et al., 2020).

Educational exclusion was highest among young people from poor segments of the population where it reached 24% for 15-17 year-olds. The differences observed by socioeconomic level are particularly worrying since this type of exclusion increases the chances that those affected will remain in poverty, reducing their opportunities for integration into social and working life and contributing to the persistence of social structures with high levels of inequality. In addition, exclusion rates varied significantly depending on the country, with those in Mesoamerica showing the highest rates for this age group: Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador had the highest percentages of exclusion of 15-17 year-olds at 48%, 42% and 38%, respectively (Acevedo et al., 2020). Moreover, 23% of 18-24 year-olds had left the education system without having completed their secondary education (CIMA, 2018).



FIGURE 2 ■ EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION BY AGE



Source: Acevedo et al. (2020).

Note: In thousands (K) or millions (M) the absolute number of children or young people excluded from the educational system, that is, those whose relatives responded in a household survey that they do not attend school.

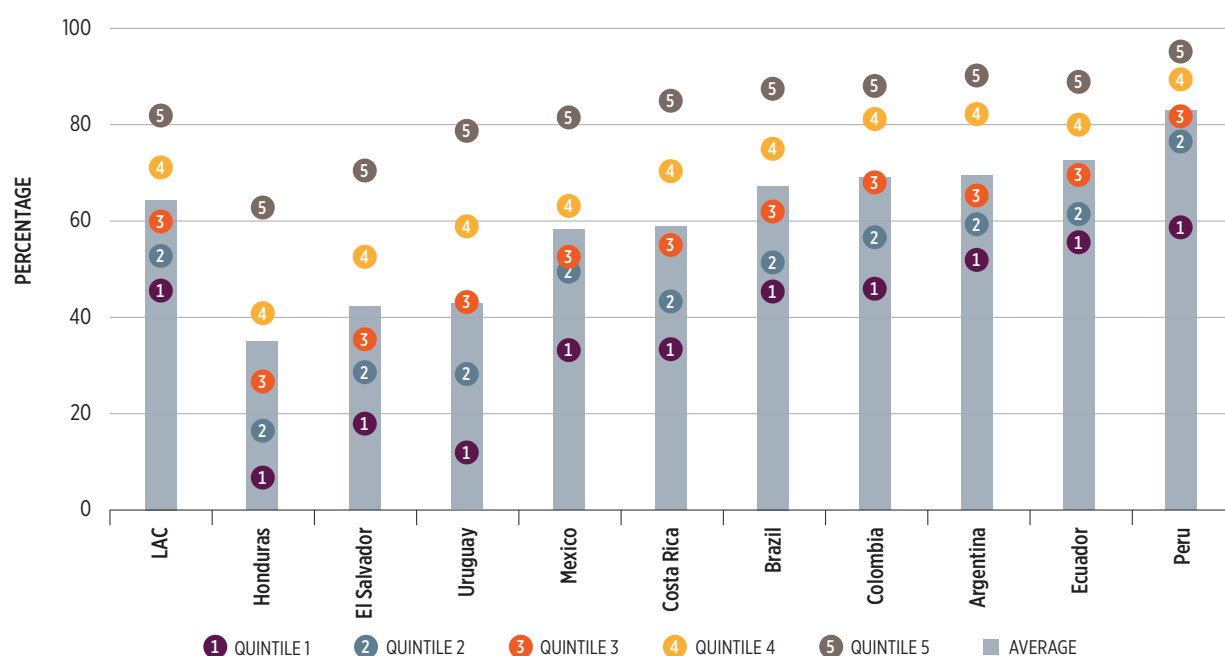
Completion rates can also be used to analyze the phenomenon of educational exclusion. With a completion rate of 94%, primary education is now practically universal (CIMA, 2018). However, in 2018, only 64% of young people in Latin America had completed their secondary schooling (CIMA, 2018).¹ There was, moreover, a marked difference by socioeconomic level: among the richest students (Q5), the completion rate reached 83% but only 46% among the poorest (Q1). This difference was even more marked in some of the region's countries. In Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Uruguay, the gap reached more than 50 percentage points. In contrast to its high level of development in other social indicators, Uruguay had one of the region's widest gaps, with a secondary completion rate of 12% for students from the poorest quintile as compared to 79% for the richest quintile.

1. This indicator refers to the percentage of young people who have completed their secondary education by the time they are 3 to 5 years older than the official age of entry into the last year of this level of education.



The importance of these indicators of inequality is even greater when taking into account the fact that LAC has one of the world's highest levels of income inequality, a large indigenous population and high levels of rurality. All of these factors make children's and young people's entry into education systems and permanence there even more complex.

FIGURE 3 ■ COMPLETION RATE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION BY SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL, 2018



Source: CIMA (2018).

In this context, it is important to consider the effect that the closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will have in terms of educational exclusion. This new challenge further aggravates the situation in the region concerning this problem (Box 1). More than ever, it is necessary to redouble efforts to find systemic evidence-based responses, integrating what is known about educational exclusion in the continent and the world.



BOX 1

The impact of the pandemic on educational exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean

In March 2021, a year after the start of the pandemic, LAC continued to be the most affected region by school closures, with an average of 158 days of in-person classes lost and 114 million students without in-person schooling (UNICEF, 2021). The prolonged closures will have negative repercussions in terms of both learning and dropout and promotion, with an even greater effect on economically vulnerable and indigenous students, migrants and those with special needs (Álvarez Marinelli et al., 2020). Similarly, those students who are lagging behind and are over-age, as well as those in critical years, run a greater risk of exclusion from the system. In other words, the COVID-19 crisis appears to be exacerbating the gaps that already existed in the region in terms of educational exclusion. In addition to inequities in access to technological devices and internet, vulnerable households face structural conditions - such as overcrowding or the adults' lack of the skills required to support the educational process - that work against the probability of achieving educational continuity during the pandemic (Acevedo et al., 2020).

The study by Acevedo et al. (2020) estimates that the COVID-19 crisis could increase educational exclusion by at least 15%, equivalent to at least 1.2 million 6-17 year-olds. According to the report, most of these children and young people are from the most vulnerable families: 38% are from poor households and 44% from vulnerable middle-class households, which will further increase inequality. The trend over the previous decade in terms of the percentage of 15-17 year-olds excluded from the education system under "normal" conditions suggested an exclusion rate of 18% in 2020. However, current estimates point to an average rate of 22%, implying that the effects of the pandemic will undo 67% of the gains achieved over the last decade, taking the rate back close to its level in 2012: in other words, almost a lost decade (Acevedo et al., 2020).

UNESCO (2020) estimates that 3.1 million students in LAC, from pre-school to university level, are at risk of not returning to school after the closures caused by COVID-19.



4 What does research on educational exclusion tell us?

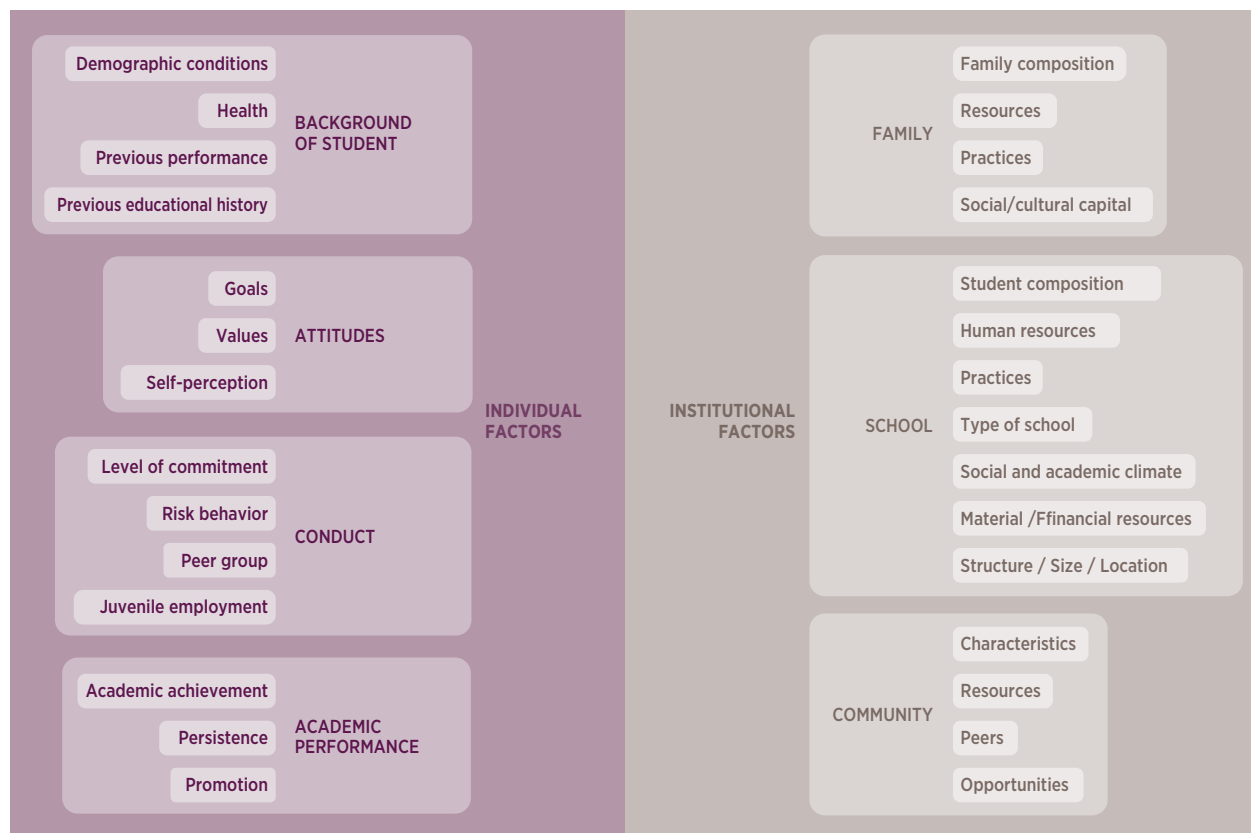
There is an important body of accumulated knowledge about educational exclusion. More than 30 years of research have provided substantial evidence about its causes and the factors associated with it (De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Tukundane et al., 2015; Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009).

Given that there is no single factor that can explain the continuity or interruption of a student's pathway, educational exclusion is an inherently multi-causal phenomenon (Freeman and Simonsen, 2015). A pathway's interruption is not only a matter of what happens at school. Although factors such as student performance and conduct are fundamental, the community environment, family history and behavior outside school are as important as what happens in it (McDermott et al., 2019; Zaff et al., 2017).

Rumberger's (2012) seminal work, based on a systematic review of the principal research undertaken in the United States, proposes a conceptual framework that helps to order the factors that must be considered when addressing the phenomenon of educational exclusion. This model categorizes the intervening factors into two types: individual factors and institutional factors. The former are those directly associated with students and refer to their background, attitudes, conduct and academic performance while institutional factors are those associated with the contexts that have the most influence on students: their family, school and community. This conceptual framework is extremely useful in addressing the factors involved in the phenomenon and also allows them to be complemented with other relevant factors highlighted in the literature. Figure 4 shows the main factors and elements in educational exclusion based on the conceptual model of Rumberger (2012), together with some additional elements proposed by De Witte et al. (2013).



FIGURE 4 ■ **CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FACTORS IN EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION**



Source: Compiled by authors based on Rumberger (2012) and De Witte et al. (2013).



The accumulated evidence reveals the different magnitudes of these factors, as well as their different impacts on the phenomenon of educational exclusion. Key risk factors at the level of the student include absenteeism, poor educational performance and negative attitudes towards academic work as well as some risk behaviors such as teenage pregnancy and problematic drug or alcohol use. As effective predictors of educational exclusion, teachers' quality stands out as a risk factor at the school level,² low parental education as a family risk factor, and high levels of crime in the community as a community risk factor.

Beyond the magnitude and implications of the different factors, the key aspect to be borne in mind is that they are numerous, diverse and interconnected. As a result, the accumulation of risk factors at different levels increases the probability of educational exclusion (González-Rodríguez, Vieira and Vidal, 2019). Moreover, the accumulation of these risks over time is one of the factors most closely associated with exclusion, more so than any other individual factor (Hammond et al., 2007). In this sense, it is vital to understand that educational exclusion occurs after a long process of dropout from the school and education system and should, therefore, be understood as a process rather than a specific event (Jimerson et al., 2000; Lamb et al., 2010; Román, 2013).

The identification of the main factors behind educational exclusion is essential for building protection systems for educational pathways that allow diagnosis and action on these factors. Once the factors have been identified, early warning systems can be used to guard against the accumulation over time of the effects of individual and institutional factors and, thus, reverse the dynamics of educational exclusion before they affect a student's pathway (González-Rodríguez, Vieira and Vidal, 2019).

2. Teacher quality can be conceptualized in different ways and, therefore, operationalized through different indicators such as internal and/or external teacher evaluation, qualifications and training, level of satisfaction on the part of students and pedagogy and classroom practices.



5 Lessons learned for the design and implementation of systems to protect educational pathways

The protection of educational pathways seeks to build the conditions in which the journeys of children and young people within the education system can be continuous, complete and high-quality, reducing educational exclusion and creating equal opportunities for learning and development (UNICEF, 2020). As indicated above, these systems are based on two components: a component of detection and a component of intervention (or set of interventions) to reduce or mitigate the risk of educational exclusion.

At the most general level, the countries that have achieved good results in the protection of educational pathways have started by recognizing the importance of addressing the phenomenon of educational exclusion in an integral, rigorous and planned manner, anchored in an appropriate institutional framework and a set of actors with clear roles, functions and responsibilities. The importance of having a system for the protection of educational pathways is clear and this recognition serves as the basis for the articulation of the rest of the devices and short, medium and long-term plans.

Outside the region, and more specifically in Europe, some successful strategies are based on a model with common elements for prevention, intervention and guidance from early levels and a specific focus on the most vulnerable groups. Countries such as Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece and Ireland - where educational exclusion has fallen over the last ten years - have educational pathway protection systems that use a multidisciplinary approach based on the detection and intervention components. In addition, they implement intensification strategies for those students at risk of exclusion, with more teaching time and alternative approaches to the teaching and learning process.

Using the accumulated experience of protection systems for educational pathways, it is possible to identify a series of key aspects and lessons learned, which must be taken into account in the design and implementation of effective systems:



UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Assessment of the local school context and the ability to adapt to it are key elements in a system to protect educational pathways. Within a general framework of actions and objectives, it is essential to be able to adjust to the social, cultural and economic needs of the corresponding educational community. In this sense, an essential first step is a solid diagnosis of the characteristics of the problem of exclusion in the specific education system, taking into account the different regional and local situations. Similarly, the identification of key actors and allies for the system's implementation is vital to ensure its effectiveness.

DETECTION AND INTERVENTION

In the education systems where effective educational pathway protection systems have been established, these have been based on the two key components discussed above. Detection, which consists of preventive work to identify students and groups at risk, is usually based on integrated information systems that contain relevant data about students. Intervention, in turn, seeks to identify support points through which to generate rewarding and sustainable educational experiences for students at risk. It calls for a set of alternatives and strategies that can be adapted to the different stages of the educational process (Eurydice, 2014).

EDUCATION MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS (SIGEDS)

A SIGED is key as a reliable source of the information required for opportune detection of students or groups of students at risk of exclusion (Arias Ortiz et al., 2020). In this sense, a single nominal register of students that includes their personal data, academic data (digital report book) and socio-educational data as well as information about, for example, conduct, attendance, exams and repetition is a clear advantage from the standpoint of an educational pathway protection system. Using the nominal register, it is possible to reconstruct a student's real educational pathway and it also makes it easier to access information through which to identify risk of exclusion.

FOCUS ON RETENTION AND REINCORPORATION

A system to protect educational pathways must consider initiatives for both retaining and reincorporating students (Lamb et al., 2010). In the case of retention, it is essential to establish a variety of socio-educational support strategies, which must be implemented by schools, based on the evidence provided by information systems (early warning systems) and the guidelines



drawn up at the national and sub-national levels. Reintegration strategies for students who are already outside the school system are also essential. This implies, for example, the creation or expansion of second-chance schools and the strengthening of catch-up and learning acceleration programs as well as flexibility in tailoring services to the needs of vulnerable populations, such as young mothers, migrants or young people who have fallen significantly behind (Eurydice, 2014). At this point, it is key to envisage multiple re-entry points, which can be adapted to different contexts and situations. In LAC, the focus has been on developing initiatives to keep students in the system (rather than their reintegration) since those who drop out tend to become permanently excluded and have little possibility of resuming their educational pathway (Espinoza et al., 2020). Fortunately, some initiatives adopted in recent years open a range of new opportunities for the resumption of students' educational pathways. They include the *Vuelvo a Estudiar* (I Go Back to Studying) initiative of the Education Ministry of Argentina's Santa Fe Province, which identifies students outside the education system and generates reintegration strategies at the territorial level. Within this framework, it is worth noting the *Vuelvo a Estudiar Virtual* (I Go Back to Virtual Studying) initiative, developed as a new flexible alternative for students who do not have a real possibility of reintegration under a daily in-person regime.

THE SCHOOL AT THE CENTER OF THE INTERVENTION

Many of the factors that influence educational pathways cannot necessarily be addressed from the educational system standpoint since they require more comprehensive and complex policies and practices (Sabates et al., 2010). However, it is necessary to recognize the importance of those factors that are associated with what happens at school and to understand that the educational experiences generated there can play a crucial role in counterbalancing other factors, such as poverty, origin or family history, whose intervention through the education system is more complex (Román, 2013). Several experiences have recognized this element and have put schools at the center of intervention, developing capabilities and creating devices for identification and early action that can be activated from this level (Baker et al., 2020; Eurydice, 2014; McDermott, Donlan and Zaff, 2019; Román, 2013).

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES AND CAPACITIES

It is fundamental to ensure that schools have the resources and basic conditions required to address the challenge of exclusion. Key factors include the provision of guidance from early stages and the presence of permanent psychosocial support teams (Eurydice, 2014). Experience shows that any pro-inclusion initiative must be backed by a consistent medium-term human resource strategy under which schools are equipped with specialized teams (thus lightening the work of their teaching and management teams) and the existing teams receive constant



training on the institutional and pedagogical approach to inclusion (Muñoz Stuardo, 2020). The pedagogical dimension of educational inclusion as such should also be a clear priority since the best way to guarantee an effective educational pathway is through high-quality education that is sensitive to students' problems and needs (Muñoz Stuardo, 2020).

INTERMEDIATE LEVELS WITH DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY

The basic principle for the development of a system to protect educational pathways is that it should not be a concentrated model controlled by a central level, but one that has the ability to operate with coordination and cooperation between different levels and institutions at the local level, such as that being implemented by the European Union (Eurydice, 2014). Flexibility for the adjustment and adaptation of strategies is key, with an emphasis on the need for important capacity for decision-making at intermediate levels. In this way, the general framework of programs can be defined and, at the same time, capacities for decision-making delegated in real-time following the different needs of school contexts, strengthening the work of schools as a fundamental actor in the process (Muñoz Stuardo, 2020).

INTERSECTORALITY AND COOPERATION

Intersectorality and cooperation in the coordination of initiatives is a central aspect of experiences that have addressed exclusion appropriately. One of their key features is that they work through systems that, albeit assigning the main role to education systems, also incorporate a wide range of institutions that function cooperatively. Intersectorality is important both as a means of generating information for the system - through the incorporation of data from other state agencies such as those dealing with health, cash transfers, households' employment situation, etc. - and for planning interventions and specific work with students and their families. The contribution of other territorial actors who know the families, such as local governments, community health centers, the agencies of social development ministries and civil society organizations is of the highest importance for an integrated approach to the planned strategies and interventions.

ADAPTATION TO THE DIVERSITY AND DYNAMISM OF THE PHENOMENON

The evidence from interventions indicates that educational exclusion is a dynamic phenomenon with changing manifestations. In this sense, the task of reducing it must be viewed as requiring constant effort over time, with an institutional framework capable of adjusting to the new challenges it poses, such as that posed today by a global pandemic that has millions



of students without in-person attendance at their schools. The dynamism of this context will bring new challenges for existing work structures and will make it necessary to multiply the points of analysis, observation and intervention in the face of new unforeseen situations.

DEFINITION OF GOALS, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

It is advisable to define specific goals for the reduction of educational exclusion at the regional and central levels. In the case of the European Union, these were agreed upon in the framework of a global strategy, with analysis and specific goals for each of the member states. In addition, it is important that monitoring and evaluation are designed in a way that permits rigorous recording of the system's achievements and limitations, which is key for ensuring the sustainability of initiatives of this type. At the school level, it is also advisable to specify windows of time for action on interventions triggered by alerts so as to be able to monitor and evaluate the impact on the student's risk situation and consider the implementation of other complementary or alternative strategies in those cases where the risk situation has not been reversed (Cura, 2020).



6 Next steps

This Step 1 for the development of systems to protect educational pathways briefly summarizes the main concepts involved: conceptualization, objectives, components, evidence and lessons learned. The next publications in the series will look in greater depth at the different topics related to the design and implementation of these systems. Specifically, Step 2 will discuss the keys for the design of early warning systems, which are essential for the construction of an effective system, as well as data sources, relevant indicators and different types of early warning systems. Step 3 will focus on timely interventions for the protection of educational pathways, presenting evidence from effective support interventions and lessons learned about timely interventions and remedial strategies. Finally, Step 4 will look at a selection of experiences of educational pathway protection systems in LAC and provide a summary of progress to date on early warning systems, timely interventions and remedial strategies.



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