

EXCERPTED FROM

Education and the Future of Latin America

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Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 A Vision for Quality Education in Latin America	1
2 The Inequality of Educational Outcomes	19
3 Building the Foundation for Better Education	43
4 The Imperative of Early Childhood Education	61
5 Bringing Quality Education to Rural Areas	77
6 Education Policy for Indigenous Populations	95
7 Teachers and Teaching	115
8 The Challenges of Crime and Violence	137
9 Bridging the Digital Divide	155

viii Contents

10	Higher Education as a Force for Greater Equality	175
11	The Crucial Role of Sustained Public Leadership	197
	<i>References</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	227
	<i>About the Book</i>	245

1

A Vision for Quality Education in Latin America

This book is about a vision for quality education in Latin America. Why devote a whole book to education, when there are so many other problems in the region? For me, the answer to this question is very personal. I was born in a small village in the Peruvian Andes mountains. My parents were poor, and I was among the youngest of sixteen children. Only nine of my siblings survived to adulthood. In the parlance of Latin America, I am *Indígena*—of indigenous origin—and because of that, I was almost certain to remain poor and socially marginalized as an adult. My children would also be likely to be poor and marginalized.

When I was four years old, my family moved to Chimbote, a port town on the Peruvian coast north of Lima. In Chimbote, I shined shoes to earn money for my family, and we lived in a *población marginal*, a sprawling shantytown at the edge of the city. But in Chimbote I got to go to school, and I was fortunate enough to have some teachers who encouraged me to continue into secondary education. I also—purely by chance—got to know two Peace Corps volunteers living in our barrio. They performed a miracle for me—they helped me get into a US university, the University of San Francisco, and after graduation from USF, I was accepted to Stanford, first into the master's program in international education, then to do a PhD.

Thus, access to education changed my life. It's a great story of a poor kid making good. Without education, I would have ended up never fully using my God-given intellectual capacity. I could have

never been a university professor, worked for the United Nations, or helped my country change course at a very difficult time. My contribution to my country's economic growth and political development would have been far less. That is why I am such a strong believer in the enabling and transformative power of schooling.

Yet, for all its uplifting qualities, my story is also one set in a harsh overriding reality. In the 1960s and 1970s, when all this happened for me, my case was dishearteningly unique. Few of my friends in that Chimbote barrio made it to secondary school, and not one to university. True, many changes have occurred since then. Education in Latin America has greatly expanded access to secondary school and university. In the past two decades, many countries in Latin America, including Peru, also had a long period of economic growth, and that has helped us pay teachers more reasonably and to improve somewhat the quality of schooling than what was available to me and my friends. But even today, Indigenous children in my country and in other parts of Latin America are far behind European-origin children in access to educational and economic opportunities. Rural children—and there are many of them in Latin America—are typically denied the same quantity and quality of schooling as children in urban areas. And low-income urban children, no matter their race or ethnicity, attain much lower levels of schooling than children from middle- and upper-class families.

Every year that this unequal access to educational opportunity continues in Latin America is another year that we lose in harnessing the massive intellectual potential of children effectively excluded from the education they deserve. I am fully aware that educational access alone is not nearly enough to develop this intellectual capacity or to transform it into productive, satisfying lives. We need to continue to grow our economies and to do so more equitably and in a more environmentally sound way. We also need to commit ourselves to ensuring that all families get adequate nutrition, clean water, and decent housing, and that we both build the underlying infrastructure to promote investment in good jobs and empower our most vulnerable populations to resist the environmental degradation of their communities. That said, I am a firm believer that, done correctly, schooling and other forms of education can play a key role in making life much better for children like those I grew up with but who did not have my opportunities.

In the pages that follow, I will present my ideas for how we can achieve this lofty goal over the next generation. Before I do that, I

briefly assess where Latin American education stands now, including its accomplishments over the past generation, and I will lay out the most important obstacles I see impeding serious educational change. Many of these obstacles are outside the public schooling systems that form the backbone of Latin American education. But we also need our public and private schools and universities to change if we are to move forward.

Probably the greatest impediment to improving the health of poor children and raising the quality of education they receive is political. As a former head of state, I am well aware of the pressure to produce results in the short term. Most elected leaders have only four years, some five, and a few, eight, to realize politically visible gains that they can point to as their accomplishments. However, most investments in the young and the poor—so important for society's progress—take a long time to pay off. The economic and social gains will come fifteen, twenty, even thirty years down the road. Politicians know that if they make these investments for the long term they probably will not get credit for them. Unfortunately, this means that it will take exceptional leaders with vision and dedication to the public good to mobilize the resources needed for the policies I propose.

Others have noted that to get politicians to change their political horizon and to reduce inequality in Latin America would require a significant change in the political consciousness of Latin America's elites (Tedesco, 2014). There is a lot of truth in that argument, but it does not explain the dynamic through which elite consciousness would change. I think that the one source of change will be social movements working within democratic institutions, such as occurred in Peru in the late 1990s, in Brazil in the early 2000s, and in the past decade or even two decades in Chile. These pushed the political systems to implement policies favoring lower income groups within the confines of ongoing democracy. The second source will be exceptional leaders that lead broad coalitions, including more socially conscious factions of elite groups, to reconstruct the long-run development process in the region. I will discuss examples of such leadership in the course of this book.

In my assessment of the current situation and suggestions for reform, I try to keep in mind that Latin America is a very large and diverse region. Countries' population sizes vary greatly, as well as the race/ethnic compositions of their populations. The income and wealth of countries in the region also vary greatly, and so does the quality of their national education systems, at least as measured by student performance on international tests. I realize that many of the

policies I recommend do not apply equally to large, federal Brazil and to compact Costa Rica, or to mainly European-origin Chile and to Bolivia or Peru, with their important Indigenous populations. That said, there is enough commonality among nations in the region that I intend to use the diversity in educational and social improvement to spread those policies that seem to have worked in the countries and subregions making the most progress. I also devote a chapter to the politics of Indigenous education and how it relates to the definition of the nation-state in my own society, Peru, and in Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, and other countries with smaller proportions of Indigenous peoples.

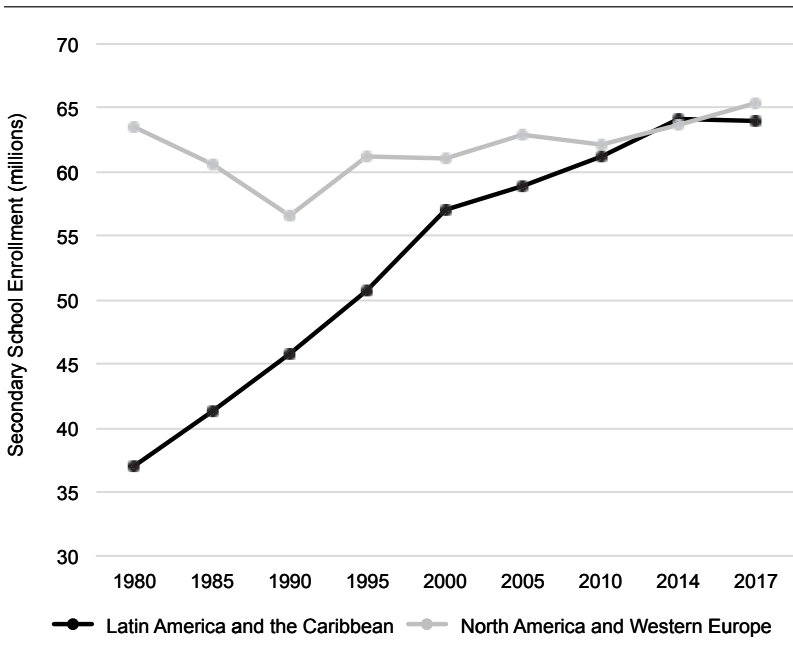
The Great Expansion of Latin American Education

As in much of the rest of the world, the expansion of secondary and tertiary education in Latin America since 1980 has been remarkable. The average teenager in most of Latin America today completes lower secondary school, and in some countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica, more than half complete upper secondary schooling.

The region as a whole has increased access to schooling and so has every country in the region. Access to primary schooling is essentially universal, even in poor rural areas, although in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, about 15 to 20 percent of students still do not complete primary school. Access to secondary and tertiary education among countries has been generally transformed as well, but this varies greatly across the region.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show how enrollment growth in Latin America compared to North America (excluding Mexico) plus Western Europe in 1980 to 2017. The two populations are of different size, obviously, but the notable feature here is that secondary enrollment exploded in Latin America during this period, and tertiary-level enrollment in Latin America began to catch up with the United States and Europe. In the UNESCO definition we use, tertiary education includes some non-university higher education in Latin America and a lot in the United States (community colleges), so it is not exactly a measure of university enrollment. Yet, it does indicate that enrollment in institutions beyond high school in Latin America jumped from less than 5 million in 1980 to over 25 million in 2017.

Figure 1.1 Secondary School Enrollment, by Region, 1980–2017 (millions)

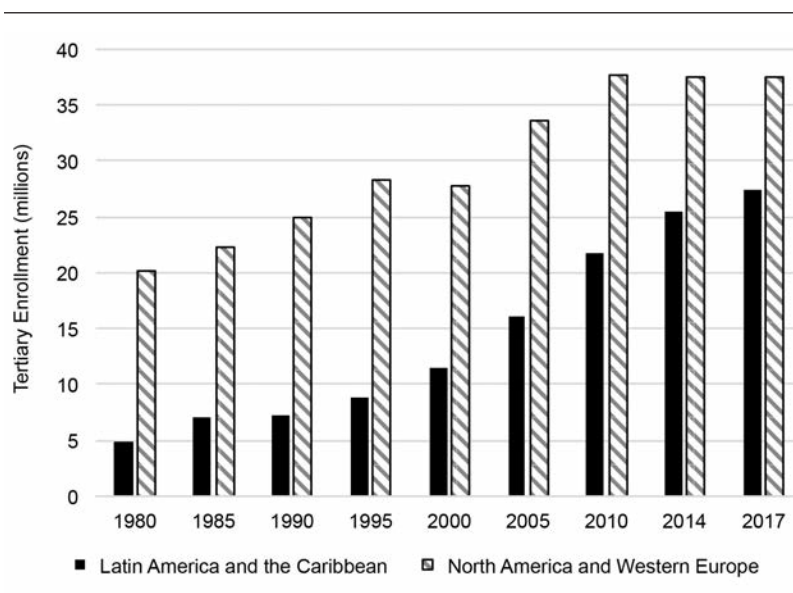


Source: UNESCO Statistical Institute, 2021.

I already mentioned that the enrollment rate in both upper secondary and tertiary education varies greatly among countries in the region. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 show how big this variation is. The bars in Figure 1.3 represent *net* enrollment rates in upper secondary school. Net rates adjust the number of students in school for student repetition (hence age) and divide that adjusted enrollment by the total number of young people of upper secondary school age. These figures are therefore a good estimate of the percentage of the age group in school in 2014. Chile and Cuba had more than 80 percent of the age group in upper secondary school, and a number of countries have over 50 percent in school, but there are three Central American countries with barely more than one in five young people in school after the eighth or ninth grade.

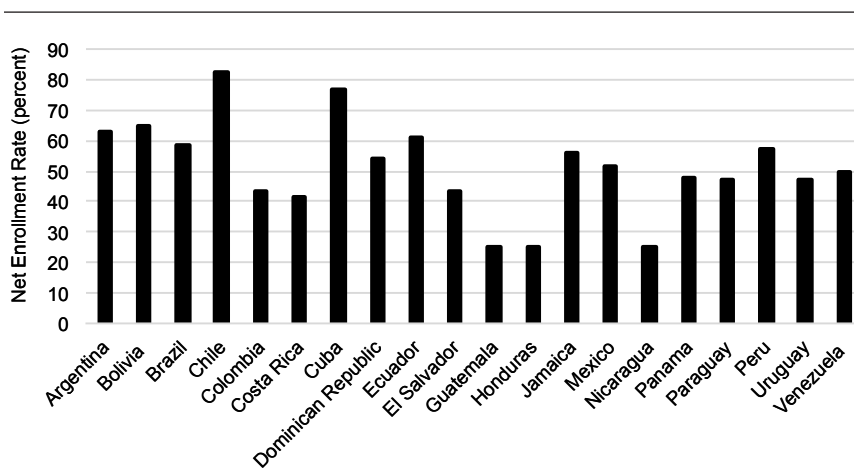
In Figure 1.4, I show gross enrollment rates (GER) for tertiary education (net rates are not available), which is the percentage of all the students enrolled in tertiary education institutions divided by the number of young people eighteen to twenty-four years old. Thus,

Figure 1.2 Tertiary Education Enrollment, by Region, 1980–2017
(millions)



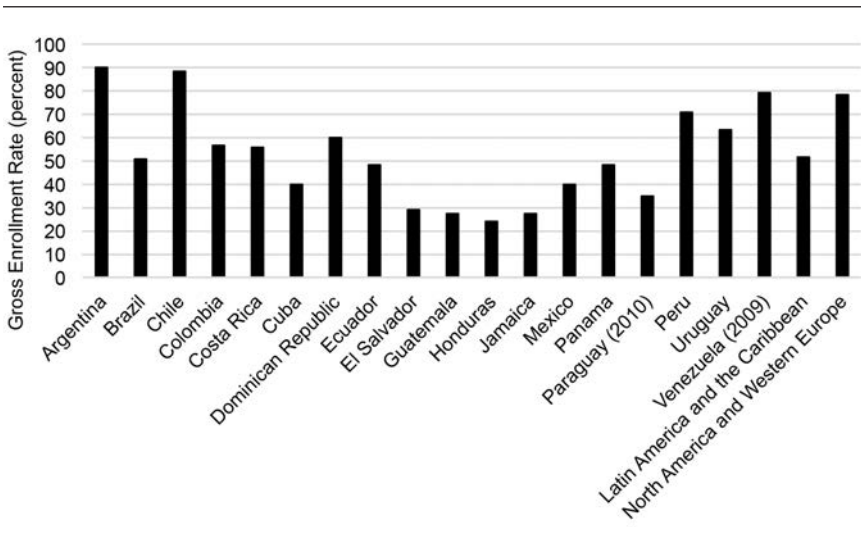
Source: UNESCO Statistical Institute, 2021.

Figure 1.3 Net Upper-Secondary Enrollment Rate, by Country, 2014
(percent)



Source: UNESCO Statistical Institute, 2021.

Figure 1.4 Tertiary Gross Enrollment Rate, by Country and Region, 2017 (percent)



Source: World Bank, 2021.

these are overestimates of the “true” percentage of young people in higher education, mainly because there are significant numbers of students in tertiary education who are outside the six years covered in the eighteen-to-twenty-four-years age group. The more students who work while studying and take more than six years to finish their course work, the greater the overestimate. Keeping this in mind, the GER for tertiary education for Latin America as a whole is quite high, at 50 percent. Even if the “true” rate was as low as 35 percent, that is about half the GER for the United States and Western Europe. And unless the GERs are highly overestimated in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, those countries incorporate a high percentage of their age group in some form of education after they leave secondary school. At the other extreme, the poor Central American countries had rates of tertiary attendance well below 30 percent even in 2017.

The story of the past thirty plus years is therefore one of a rapidly changing educational landscape, where today in most Latin American countries a typical young person reaches upper secondary education (tenth to twelfth grade) but probably does not complete it. For those students who do complete upper secondary, going to some

form of tertiary education is also very likely. This means that probably 35 percent of Latin American young people take education beyond high school. This is not European levels, but it is still a major accomplishment for a “developing” region of the world. It also means that from here on out, the labor force in Latin America is going to become secondary school educated, probably easier to train than in the past, and more able to take on complex tasks.

Educational Quality

Latin American students score lower (and in some countries, *much* lower) on international tests than students in highly developed countries, even when the scores are adjusted for the fewer academic resources that Latin American students’ have in their families (books in the home and parents’ education) compared to students in highly developed countries. For example, on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2018 PISA test (Programme for International Student Assessment), if we assume that fifteen-year-olds in Spain and Portugal and in the highest scoring Latin American countries (Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay) all had similar family academic resources, students in Spain still score 40–50 points higher in mathematics than students in these top scoring Latin American countries, and students in Portugal, another 20 points higher than in Spain. The differences are smaller in reading (20–40 points), but even students in Chile, with the highest PISA reading score in Latin America, score significantly lower in reading than students in Spain and much lower than students in Portugal.

As far as Peru is concerned, fifteen-year-old students’ performance, adjusted for family resources, on both the PISA reading and math is significantly lower than in either Chile or Mexico, even in the PISA 2018, when Peruvian students’ scores increased compared to student achievement in both those countries. International tests are only one measure of student learning, and there are factors other than schooling that impact student learning, even when we adjust for home academic resource differences. Peru has made a lot of progress in raising the quality of its primary and secondary schooling, but I have visited many classrooms in Peru, and I have witnessed the lack of resources in most of them. Teachers are still poorly trained to work with the many low-income children who attend Peruvian schools, and the teachers are also still greatly underpaid. The curriculum is not up

to international standards, and many teachers, especially those working in low-socioeconomic schools, do not complete the required curriculum during the academic year. My personal experience, although many years ago, was that I had some very caring teachers, but I was rarely challenged by what they were teaching—I could have done a lot more, and so could many other students in the class. The main point I want to make is that what I have seen in Peruvian schools and my own experience suggest that the results of the PISA tests and other international tests in Peru are not distorting the reality of how much Peruvian students are learning in Peruvian classrooms.

It is fair to ask what I did about this as president of Peru. To start, I did two very important things that had short- and long-term effects on Peruvian education. The first is that I doubled teachers' salaries over a three-year period during my presidency. This may seem far removed from the issue of educational quality, but teacher salaries were so low when I assumed the presidency in 2001 that teachers were completely demoralized and their work (hence student learning) suffered greatly. I also initiated a major program of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) for Peru's very poor. Again, this does not seem to have much to do directly with the quality of schooling. Yet, by requiring families receiving the transfer to keep their children in school, and conditioning the money on families' taking children in for regular checkups at clinics that we built around the country, I believe that CCTs did have an important effect on children's capacity to learn.

It is also fair to ask why I did not do more for education during my five years. I provide some answers to that question throughout this book. They focus mainly on the lessons I learned about how difficult it is to improve the process of schooling, despite my training at Stanford in the economics of education and educational policy. I also discuss how we might change the disincentives to politicians to invest in educational improvement when the fruits of that improvement take so much longer to realize than the single term of an administration (in Peru, five years).

Is the Quality of Schooling the Problem or Is It Poverty?

The low level of student learning in Latin America is the main issue I focus on in this book. Schooling quality is an important reason that students in some countries learn more than others and that students in some school districts and schools learn more than others. But there

are other aspects of student learning that we should keep in mind as we address the issue. First, schooling quality is only part of the learning problem. Many analysts, including economics Nobel Prize-winner James Heckman (Heckman, 2011) have identified the conditions in which children develop in their early years are crucial to their development, and hence their later learning. Even once children enter primary school, the conditions they face outside school greatly affect their learning. The bottom line is that a child that has been malnourished or suffered poor health in his or her early years is not going to be able to learn as much in school as a well-nourished healthy child. Outside of school opportunities to learn during the school years are also an important component of student learning. School meets about thirty-six to forty weeks per year in almost every country. The activities that students engage in during the other twelve to sixteen weeks per year and in the hours after school on the days that school meets are key to the gains that students make over the course of each year (Alexander, 2007). Families in many countries of Asia, for example, enroll their children in after-school and vacation tutoring and cram courses beginning in primary school (Bray and Lykins, 2012).

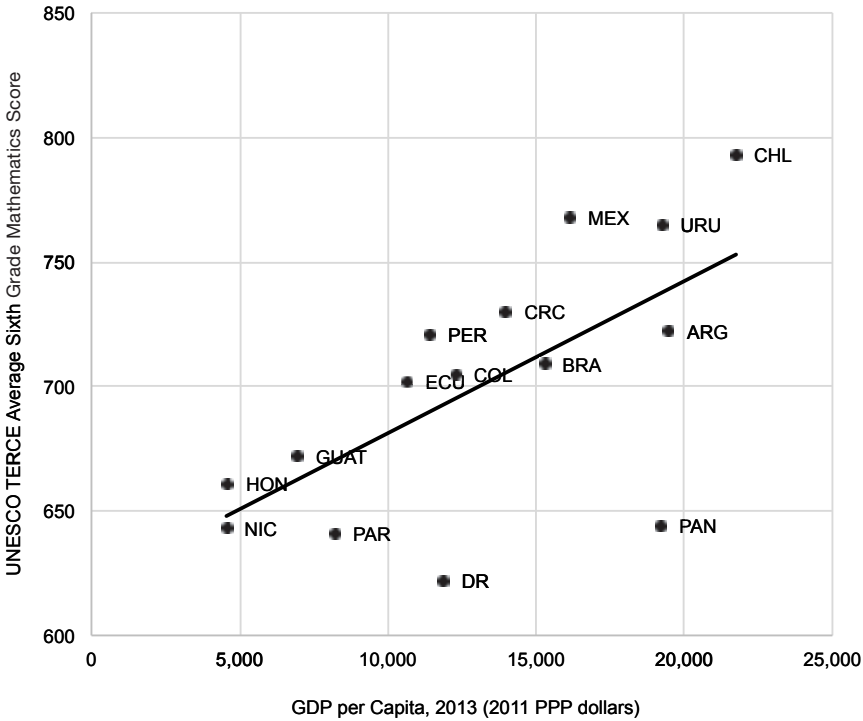
Outside of school opportunities to engage in enriched learning stimuli is the positive end of a spectrum of “educational context” that I believe has an enormous impact on how much young people learn overall as they are growing up, and these opportunities may even affect how much they learn in school. For children growing up in poor families, and that is still 40 percent of Latin American families, the spectrum of educational context not only lacks positive opportunities for academic learning, it largely consists of *negative* experiences around violence, hunger, poor health, and the necessity to work many difficult hours weekly to help their families to survive. Rather than focusing on how to give their children opportunities for learning in their early childhood before they enter school and opportunities for learning in activities outside of school once enrolled in school, a typical poor family, for all its desires to do these things for their children, is forced to focus all its energy on physically surviving. I have asserted elsewhere (Toledo, 2015) that child poverty is the greatest barrier to making education work for social mobility in our Latin American societies. No education policy can be successful for the mass of Latin American children without simultaneously changing the conditions they face in their daily lives outside of school.

Student Performance in Latin America

Keeping these caveats in mind, the evidence also suggests that schooling does vary in quality, meaning that students in some countries and localities do learn more mathematics and reading in their schools because of better-skilled teachers; better curriculum and teaching methods; and better organized schools, school districts, and state and national educational administrations. We can show two simple examples of this at the national level. The first shows the relationship between UNESCO's Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) sixth grade mathematics test score averages by country relative to their gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the same year the test was given, 2013, with the GDP per capita expressed in 2011 PPP dollars—this means that the GDP per capita is adjusted for cost of living differences among countries. Figures 1.5 and 1.6 show this relationship, and they suggest that sixth grade students in some countries are performing better than predicted in mathematics and reading given the gross product per person in that country, and sixth grade students in some countries are performing much worse than predicted. Chilean, Uruguayan, Mexican, Costa Rican, and Peruvian students are performing considerably above the prediction line in mathematics, and students in Paraguay, Dominican Republic, and Panama are performing far below the prediction line.

In reading, Chilean, Colombian, Costa Rican, and Mexican students do better than predicted, and Argentina joins the other three poorer than predicted performers. GDP per capita is only one measure of a country's capacity to produce good education, but other measures, such as the social class of the sixth grade students who took the TERCE test in each country put the same countries above and below the trend line. Thus, there are education systems in Latin America that seem to be producing relatively better student performance on this test and some countries whose educational systems are doing much worse than they should be. If we had shown the scores from UNESCO's Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE) test, taken seven years earlier in 2007, we would see that sixth graders in Cuba scored much higher than students in any other Latin American country, especially in mathematics. Cuba did not participate in the 2013 TERCE test, but there is no reason to believe that scores would have been any lower. I will talk about the lessons that we can learn from Cuban education in a later chapter on teacher education and curriculum.

Figure 1.5 UNESCO TERCE Sixth Grade Math Score vs. GDP per Capita, by Country, 2013



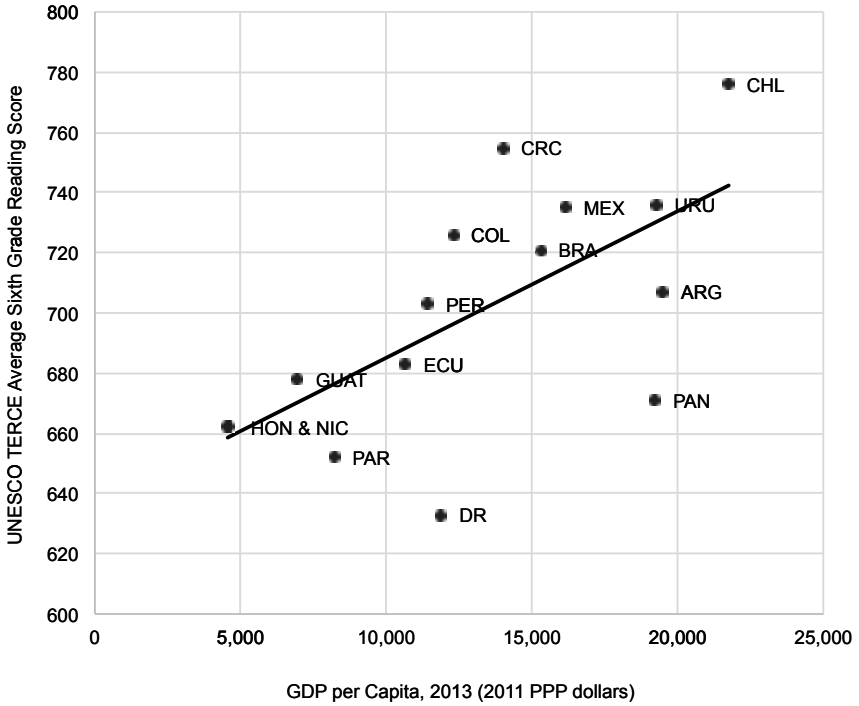
Sources: Average test scores: TERCE, 2015. *Logros de Aprendizaje*. Santiago de Chile: UNESCO, OREALC; GDP per capita: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.

Notes: ARG = Argentina, BRA = Brazil, CHL = Chile, COL = Colombia, CRC = Costa Rica, DR = Dominican Republic, ECU = Ecuador, GUAT = Guatemala, HON = Honduras, MEX = Mexico, NIC = Nicaragua, PAN = Panama, PAR = Paraguay, PER = Peru, URU = Uruguay.

Again, we need to be careful in attributing these high and low performances strictly to schooling, but they do suggest something about the quality of the educational systems.

Another example shows how students in those Latin American countries who took the PISA math test in the years 2003 to 2018 compared to each other, both in their level of performance and the change in student performance over time. To control for social class differences among students taking the test—over time in the same country and across countries—we estimate the average scores in each country as if the sample of students who took the test in each country and in each year had the same family academic resources as students

Figure 1.6 UNESCO TERCE Sixth Grade Reading Score vs. GDP per Capita, by Country, 2013



Sources: Average test scores: TERCE, 2015. *Logros de Aprendizaje*. Santiago de Chile: UNESCO, OREALC; GDP per capita: World Bank, 2021.

Notes: ARG = Argentina, BRA = Brazil, CHL = Chile, COL = Colombia, CRC = Costa Rica, DR = Dominican Republic, ECU = Ecuador, GUAT = Guatemala, HON = Honduras, MEX = Mexico, NIC = Nicaragua, PAN = Panama, PAR = Paraguay, PER = Peru, URU = Uruguay.

in a developed country such as Spain in a constant year, 2012. Table 1.1 shows these levels and trends for seven Latin American countries, two of which were below the GDP per capita trend line in Figure 1.5 (Argentina and Brazil) and the rest on or above the trend line. The average scores in the two graphs are all estimated on the assumption that the average family resources (books in the home) of students in each country and in each PISA test year were distributed as they were among the PISA sample of Spanish students in 2012.

Table 1.1 shows us that, as in the TERCE test, there are some countries in Latin America where schools might be better than in other countries. In reading, for example, students in Chile (adjusted

Table 1.1 PISA Average Mathematics and Reading Scale Scores Adjusted for Family Academic Resources (equal to the Spanish 2012 PISA sample distribution), by Country, 2003–2018

Country	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015	2018
<i>PISA Adjusted Mathematics Score by Year</i>						
Argentina		415	417	412		407
Brazil	396	399	409	412	402	414
Chile		438	440	447	445	441
Colombia		398	406	404	413	417
Mexico	414	433	443	433	425	425
Peru			398	398	412	426
Uruguay	441	450	452	442	449	446
Spain	479	478	482	485	487	485
<i>PISA Adjusted Reading Score by Year</i>						
Argentina		410	430	423		432
Brazil	432	422	436	430	432	447
Chile		467	468	463	480	475
Colombia		418	440	431	452	440
Mexico	430	437	451	444	440	440
Peru			405	414	426	430
Uruguay	454	439	453	444	471	461
Spain	475	459	480	490	496	NA ^a

Source: OECD PISA microdata, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>. Accessed April 12, 2021.

Note: a. Reading scores for Spain in 2018 have been withheld by PISA for further verification.

for family resources) are doing almost as well as in a lower scoring European country, such as Spain. In mathematics, when we adjust for family resource differences, students in Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay are still far behind Spain on the PISA test, but they do much better than the other four Latin American countries where students took this test. Especially interesting is why Argentinian fifteen-year-olds seem to perform lower in math than fifteen-year-olds do in Argentina's neighbors, Chile and Uruguay. In reading, Latin American students' performance adjusted for family academic resources is better compared to Spanish students than in math. As mentioned, Chilean students do particularly well in reading, but again, the highest scoring students are in Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico.

Table 1.1 also gives us some information about whether test scores are rising in Latin American countries. On the PISA mathe-

matics test, students in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico (in 2003–2009) have made gains, but Chile and Uruguay’s gains have been modest, and Argentine students have lost ground. In reading, almost all countries have made some gains, but they are generally modest in recent years except for Peru, which started at a low level, made gains, but remains at the lower end of the Latin American PISA spectrum. One important factor to keep in mind: when we look at gains in scores in this period for fifteen-year-olds, we need to take account of the fact that access to secondary education has been expanding rapidly in many of these countries, so that even if we are adjusting for the family academic resource composition of the student sample across countries and years of the test, the average grade the fifteen-year-olds are attending is rising over time (Klein, 2011), and that has a positive effect on test scores.

Is the level of Latin American students’ learning in school increasing? There is some indication from PISA and the UNESCO SERCE (2007) and TERCE (2014) tests that learning is increasing, but not universally and not greatly, even though the OECD has featured Brazilian gains in mathematics as one of its “examples” of great improvement in the quality of education (OECD, 2012). Students in Peru have also shown large gains, even more so were we to reference the PISA 2000 mathematics and reading test results, in which Peruvian students did quite poorly. There are also indications from national tests, such as the Prova Brasil and Chile’s Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación (SIMCE) test, that students made progress in how much they learn by the end of fourth and eighth grades (Carnoy, Khavenson, Fonseca, Costa, and Marotta, 2015, for Brazil; Bellei and Vanni, 2015, for Chile).

These are hopeful signs, but it is clear that when it comes to the quality of education—if these test scores provide a valid indicator of educational quality—Latin American education has to make much greater improvements in its classrooms in the next generation than it has in the past generation if it hopes to have students learning at the level of lower scoring European countries such as Spain. And we will show that this is only part of the story, since one of the reasons that students learn less in a typical Latin American school than they would in a Southern European or US school is that the training of a typical teacher in Latin America and the curriculum the teacher is teaching are even more inadequate to the task than in schools of developed nations. That goes not only for schools attended by low-income students, but also for high-income students. Maybe the biggest surprise is how

poorly high-income students in Latin America attending private schools perform on international tests, especially in mathematics.

The Major Challenges

Latin American education will continue to expand access. I believe that the process is unstoppable, and it is to the credit of Latin American governments that they have managed to increase the average level of schooling for young people so much in the past generation. Generally, educational expansion is beneficial for all children, and especially for disadvantaged children. There are many problems with the way educational expansion is taking place, especially at the university level, and I will talk about those in dealing with private versus public postsecondary education. However, the truly difficult problems in Latin American education we need to address in the next generation are three: (1) How do we change the conditions in which the mass of Latin America's low-income children—children living in poor rural areas and the sprawling *poblaciones* and *favelas* of urban areas, many of them Indigenous people and Blacks—grow up and learn the ways of the world? (2) How do we make the quality of schooling in Latin America—including the education of Latin America's upper-middle class but especially for low-income students—substantially better? And (3) how do we do this in a world confronting the negative impact of climate change, possibly future pandemics, and changing labor markets due to rapid technological changes requiring workers who need to readapt and learn how to learn?

I cannot claim that I have the solutions to these three fundamental issues. Yet, in what I have been able to learn in my many discussions with political and educational leaders in the region and in what I have been able to read about education in the years since my presidency, we know a lot more today about what works and does not work to reduce poverty effectively and to improve the schooling that Latin American children take for more and more years. In this book, you will find empirical evidence for the interrelationship in Latin America between investments in poverty reduction, in better education for teachers, in health care, in nutrition, in the reduction of violence, in access to digital technology, and in human dignity and democratic participation—these are all required to increase learning to high levels for every child in our societies.

I will focus on nine major challenges facing us as we try to move beyond increasing classroom seats and university places, take on improving what happens inside the classroom for all students, and drastically change the experience of low-income students both inside and outside the classroom.

1. Access to the new norm of secondary education is still very unequally distributed, and access to tertiary education, particularly university education, is even more unequally distributed.
2. Reasonable quality early childhood education and out of school enrichment experiences, which can have an important positive effect on student learning in early childhood and in primary school and beyond, is very unequally distributed in Latin America. The children who could probably benefit most from these opportunities are least likely to have access to them.
3. To the contrary, outside of school experiences for low-income children tend to be significantly *detrimental* to school learning and social mobility in the larger Latin American society. The level of violence in low-income schools in most Latin American countries is also a major detriment to student learning. These educational contexts contribute to student anxiety and detract from low-income students' ability to focus on their education.
4. The average quality of primary and secondary education in Latin America, although perhaps gradually improving, is still low, and the average quality even of elite private schools is no better than the schooling available to students from families with average income in most developed countries.
5. The quality of schooling resources available is unequally distributed among higher and lower social class students. One example of this is that teachers teaching in lower-income schools tend to be less well trained and more likely to be on temporary contracts than in higher income schools. In addition, schools in Latin America are highly social class segregated—this problem is exacerbated by the relatively high percentage of middle and higher class students attending private schools.
6. The quality of rural education is especially low in most of Latin America, and access to secondary education for rural students remains a major challenge in much of the region, in large part because of the much higher cost of quality education in rural areas.

7. In those countries with Indigenous populations, the question of improving the quality of education is made even more complex. In defining education for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, nation-states need to recognize the importance of Indigenous knowledge and the meaning of the nation-state itself.
8. In a world increasingly dominated by information technology (IT), the digital divide between urban and rural students and between lower social class and higher social class students in urban areas can have serious negative implications for these students in their job market success, and it may influence who and how many go into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers.
9. University education has a high economic payoff to graduates and has been expanding rapidly in Latin America. But the expansion has taken place very unequally, both in access by different groups in society and in the distribution of quality. Good university education is expensive, and a major question is who should pay for it, students and their families or the government through general taxation. Many countries in the region have turned to private institutions to expand access—is this the right solution?

In the chapters that follow, I want to deal with each of these topics. It is important to be realistic in trying to overcome these problems. My way of doing that is to draw on carefully researched studies that analyze the nature of the challenges and how to overcome them. It is also important to be realistic about the overall impact that better education in the region can have in solving broader Latin American social and economic issues such as economic growth, environmental degradation, or unequal income distribution.

Improving the education that young people get is a useful end in itself. Yet, arguing for a better-educated population for the sake of education is probably not going to convince the minister of economics that we should invest heavily in better and more equal education just because it will produce many more bright people. The minister wants to know how that investment will increase worker productivity, produce better citizens, and reduce the unemployment rate, among other good outcomes. I am going to argue that we need to make sure that we do not overstate the “savior” aspects of education, but rather insist on the potential beneficial effects that a better educated labor force and citizenry might contribute to making life better for everyone.