

ALL IN SCHOOL

Out-of-School
Children Initiative

UNICEF AND UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR STATISTICS

SYSTEM-WIDE APPROACHES TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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1. Profile of type A countries

Typically, Type A countries have made considerable progress in expanding access to primary. Many are increasingly working to improve access to pre-primary and secondary. Despite these advances, the central challenge of the *Out-of-School Children Initiative* – the realization of the right to education of all children – remains unfulfilled.

A persistent breach in primary. There is still a core group of primary-aged children out of school whose gap in access, rooted in deeply-ingrained structural inequalities, is persistent. Many Type A countries maintain near universal primary enrollment figures for years, without marking the progress necessary to close the remaining breach. This is because these children are the most disadvantaged and most difficult for education systems to reach, requiring the most complex and, often, costly policy responses.

Although often overshadowed, it is important not to lose track of these children since if their needs are not identified and addressed, the goal of universal primary can never be achieved. Although they may represent the “final 5%” in their specific countries, in populous nations, such as Brazil, their absolute numbers may still be large.

Late entry, high repetition and vicious cycles of temporary drop-out/re-enrollment. The out-of-school methodology measures not only current exclusion but also future risk. Here, too, Type A countries must confront significant challenges since significant swaths of their school-aged populations are at risk of early dropout. Indeed, the structural inequalities that drive lack of access also underpin other limitations in educational rights. For example, significant numbers of children in Type A countries continue to start primary late, either because their families enroll them at a later age than that contemplated in school regulations or because the education system places them in pre-primary (despite not yet being universal). Moreover, grade repetition, a widely accepted practice, is often high in the first grades of primary and may overlap with irregular attendance and/or temporary dropout and re-enrollment, where students go through the same grade multiple times, but as new enrollees rather than repeaters. These inter-related problems create an age-grade gap from the very start of children’s school path, which tends to accumulate over time, and with it, the probability of dropout.

The time bomb explodes – systemic dropout in the transition from primary to secondary. Given the link between educational exclusion and structural inequalities, the most disadvantaged children who are more likely to have experienced restricted access, late enrollment, and/or grade repetition are also the most likely to be pushed out of the education system early. Although rooted in experiences from earlier levels, the process of dropout typically materializes in the transition to lower secondary or during secondary. In this way, what begins as exclusion affecting a relatively small proportion of the primary school-aged population grows to affect a significant percentage by adolescence. For example, the enrollment rate in violence-scarred Honduras in 2011 traced the following arc: 89% among 6-year olds, peaking at near universal levels among 8-11 year-olds, followed by a precipitous 36 point drop to 64%, by age 14; that is, one out of every three adolescents of this age group was excluded.¹ As is prevalent in the Latin American and Caribbean region as a whole, boys in Honduras were more likely to be overage and, thus, at increased risk of early dropout,² highlighting that gender-based exclusion is not limited to girls.³

Exacerbating the problem, education systems are typically not geared to prevent exclusion, nor are they sufficiently flexible to respond to it once it happens. Even those who want to come back to school face bureaucratic barriers that dissuade them from even trying. The result is that the most disadvantaged children and adolescents who are more likely than their peers to be pushed out of the system, remain out.

2. Bottlenecks and barriers in type A countries

Bottlenecks

Ironically, despite advances, particularly at the primary level, some of the key bottlenecks in children's educational trajectories occur in the transition to primary and in the early grades. Impediments include:

- lack of access to pre-primary education, which can help prepare young children for entry into primary,
- disrupted enrollment in the early grades of primary, including pure late entry as well as late entry caused by education authorities enrolling primary-school aged children in pre-primary, and
- high rates of "school failure" in the early grades of primary, encompassing both grade repetition and irregular attendance

Another critical bottleneck occurs in the transition from primary to lower secondary or during the first years of secondary since these earlier problems, described above, sow the seeds of early dropout via an ever accumulating age-grade gap.

A final bottleneck is that educational systems generally lack the capacity to prevent or respond to dropout. In other words, while there are many off-ramps, there are few or no on-ramps for the millions of children and adolescents out of school.⁴

Barriers

There are dozens of potentially overlapping barriers that can explain the "why" underlying these common bottlenecks.⁵ Some of these are societal challenges, such as violence or labour market conditions. However, some of the most significant are generated by education systems and the key actors in them. Systems and pedagogical barriers include:

- lack of access, particularly at the pre-primary and secondary levels,
- inadequate policy/regulatory frameworks or poor implementation thereof, especially as regards student age, enrollment, and reinsertion of children and adolescents who have dropped out,
- irrelevant curricula,
- the absence of the necessary supports to enable teachers to form strong, collaborative teams and/or the pedagogical strategies to be able to impart basic skills to children in primary so critical to ongoing success, such as basic literacy and numeracy, and

- inadequate approaches to the evaluation of student learning as well as grade promotion, including the often misguided practice of holding children back, especially in primary, “to give them a solid foundation,” although the evidence shows the reverse is true (i.e., learning declines).

Commonly-held beliefs also pose significant barriers to educational rights. As one example, teachers, parents and even students themselves may hold low expectations about the academic potential of certain children, including those from poorer families or other disadvantaged groups. Consciously or unconsciously, these beliefs shape interactions with these children, including in relation to their initial enrollment, learning opportunities, as well as evaluation and promotion. Another is the under-estimation of the importance of pre-primary and primary on the part of families, reflected in patterns of pure late enrollment of primary-aged children and sporadic attendance.

Economic barriers also exist. These may be felt in pre-primary in particular, which is commonly offered on a fee-for-service basis by the private sector or other non-governmental entities. Although many Type A countries have middle-income status, monetary poverty and other poverty-related deprivations continue to affect significant parts of their populations; children and adolescents to a disproportionate degree. Latin America and the Caribbean is a case in point for despite economic growth, it remains the most unequal region in the developing world.

3. System-wide policy responses in type A countries

Policy responses within education systems may involve some constellation of the following:⁶

- a commitment to expand (or universalize) pre-primary and/or secondary;
- efforts to fill gaps or address ambiguities in regulatory frameworks, often in tandem with capacity development for those authorities responsible for their implementation - these steps are especially critical to prevent the enrollment of primary-aged children in pre-primary and, thus, the development of system-generated age-grade gap carried forward from pre-primary;
- improved teacher training, both their initial formation and on-going professional training, particularly in relation to teaching the basic skills required in primary, such as reading and writing but also as regards student evaluation and promotion; and
- curricula reforms, in particular, to improve relevancy

Also likely required are associated communications initiatives to counteract the myths that impinge children’s educational rights, including widely held beliefs that certain children cannot or do not want to learn; grade repetition is helpful or necessary, particularly for children judged as having poor learning prospects; and/or pre-primary and primary education (and, consequently, regular school attendance at these levels) is not particularly important. An example of the latter is the [Cero Falta \(Zero Absence\)](#) campaign from Uruguay in which children, classes and/or schools are invited to share their experiences in an annual competition, with selected entries awarded prizes and made into [short videos](#). Another is the follow-up to the Brazilian out-of-school study organized around the slogan, *Fora da escolar não pode* (*Out of school, just won’t do*), which showcases related multimedia content, including a web-based documentary as well as a user-friendly website, www.foradaescolanaopode.org.br

Communications plans may also be paired with improvements to related monitoring tools. For instance, Paraguay, a Type A country currently developing an out-of-school analysis, some teachers are using scanners to track student attendance using bar codes assigned to each student.⁷

Economic barriers may be addressed in a variety of ways. Conditional or non-conditional cash transfers are possible tools. A well-known example is Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* (*Family Grant*), which is conditioned on the recipient family ensuring their children attend school.⁸

Other policy responses to economic barriers include efforts aimed at the adequacy and efficiency of education-related resources. In some cases, the focus may be on improving the administration of existing resources. An example is Honduras, currently finalizing a national out-of-school children study, which builds on previous policy efforts, including the reform of the governing education law, harmonization of information systems as well as a capacity development strategy aimed at technical staff responsible for planning and implementation of education budgets. One important result of this first wave of reforms, were savings of US \$20 million recorded by the Honduran Education Secretariat in 2013.⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ UNICEF LACRO/ Asociación Civil Educación para Todos, “Caracterización del perfil de la exclusión al año 2011 en Honduras,” (March 2014) at p. 3.
- ² *Ibid.* at p. 8.
- ³ For example, the 2013 *Global Monitoring Report* reveals that 21 of 25 Latin American and Caribbean countries in which UNICEF operates that reported on gender parity in net secondary enrollment as of 2011 had a gender gap against boys (Argentina 1.10; Barbados 1.15; Bolivia 1.01; Chile 1.04; Colombia 1.07; Dominica 1.11; Dominican Republic 1.15; Ecuador 1.02; El Salvador 1.03; Guyana 1.13; Jamaica 1.08; Mexico 1.04; Nicaragua 1.14; Panama 1.10; Paraguay 1.08; Peru 1.01; St. Kitts and Nevis 1.05; St. Vincent and the Grenadines 1.03; Suriname 1.22; Uruguay 1.12; and Venezuela 1.11). Only 2 reported a gender gap in favour of boys (Antigua & Barbuda 0.99 and Guatemala 0.92). See: Education for All, *Global Monitoring Report 2013* (2014), online: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/statistics/statistical-tables/>
- ⁴ See, for example, the analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean Region (UNICEF and UIS, 2012b) and the update of Chapter 1 of the same (March 2014).
- ⁵ Latin America and Caribbean Region (UNICEF and UIS, 2012b) at pp. 67-108.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* at pp. 109-164
- ⁷ Session on Innovation in Education, Regional Meeting of UNICEF Education Focal Points in Latin America and the Caribbean (June 9-12, 2014).
- ⁸ See discussion in the out-of-school study from Brazil: (UNICEF and UIS, 2012a) at p. 68.
- ⁹ UNICEF Honduras Annual Reports 2012 and 2013; UNICEF Honduras inputs to global *Out-of-School Children* flyer (16 July 2014).