

Doing Away with Disparities

The gaps in educational access between males and females, literates and illiterates and urban and rural dwellers in Latin America and the Caribbean have considerably narrowed in the last decade.

The number of out-of-school children has halved, from 11.4 million in 1990 to 4.8 million in 1998, and the gender gap is almost a thing of the past. However, even though almost 95 per cent of children in the region now go to school, repetition and drop-out rates remain high. Adult literacy has reached 88 per cent, but great disparities lie behind the global figure.

Zoom

- ▶ *Widespread educational reforms coupled with a falling birth rate in Latin America and the Caribbean have had a doubly beneficial effect on education systems.*
- ▶ *Between 1990 and 1998, enrolment in early childhood education increased: today, a little over half the young children in the region are in pre-school programmes.*
- ▶ *Almost 95 per cent of children in Latin America and the Caribbean are in primary school. But there is a high proportion of both over-aged children and drop-outs.*
- ▶ *Haiti and Bolivia are notable exceptions to the overall regional trends, with over 30 per cent of children out of school.*
- ▶ *Finally, the adult literacy rate of 88 per cent masks profound disparities, ranging from 96 per cent in Uruguay to 21 per cent in Honduras.*

Education for All goals in the region were established over twenty years ago: the Major Programme for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, drawn up in 1980, had similar objectives to the subsequent World Declaration on Education for All. From 1990 onwards, the focus shifted to the importance of catering to basic learning needs and decentralization.

"As education develops, poverty and inequality will be overcome," says Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank. "This is not only an ethical theme but one that makes economic sense too." One Latin American in three lives in extreme poverty. He or she may belong to the over 30 million indigenous people who form 400 different ethnic and linguistic groups. In some Latin American countries, poverty and inequality coexist with the production and traffic of drugs – a great source of insecurity and a challenge to governments.

In Latin America, early childhood education is mainly found in middle-

class, urban areas, although innovative programmes, such as Wawa Wasi in Peru, operate in shanty-towns and other poor milieux. Co-ordinated by the education ministry and UNICEF, the programme trains local women to mind children at home, a day-care system very popular in Latin America. It has reached over 700,000 children. Early childhood education thrives in the Caribbean: 80.3 per cent of 3- to 5-year-olds were preschoolers in 1997. One programme, Servol, combines early childhood education with parenting programmes to great effect. Around 60 per cent of four-year-olds in Trinidad and Tobago are enrolled in Servol preschools.

Constructing the future: pupils at a rural school in Cuba.



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The greatest efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean have taken place in primary education, where enrolment soared from 74.3 million in 1990 to 86.8 million in 1998. "Wake up Brazil, it's time to go to school!" was an unprecedented mobilization campaign headed by the country's president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, to create new school places and encourage poorer families to use them. By 1999, 96 per cent of 7- to 14-year-olds were in school as opposed to 86 per cent in 1982. Brazil also achieved over 90 per cent literacy. Another impressive example is Mexico, which is approaching full primary school enrolment and 100 per cent literacy.

Decentralization has played a crucial role in improving access. El Salvador's EDUCO community education programme has opened up education for children in rural areas unreached by centralized systems. Ethnic minorities can learn in their own language when the education authority is local, and Escuela Nueva in Colombia has been a remarkable success story in this respect. Pupils progress at their own pace and even drop out temporarily (for the harvest or other reasons) without repeating classes. Multigrade teaching is the norm in Escuela Nueva, where teachers are given educational material and detailed lesson plans. This approach has spread throughout the region – Guatemala set up 1,000 community schools in 1997 and Paraguay and Peru are launching similar initiatives – and has been adapted as far afield as the Philippines.

Some countries make intensive use of mass media. Brazil and Mexico favour television, while Guatemala and Ecuador use radio as a training tool. These programmes also target isolated areas and indigenous groups.

The verdict of the Caribbean Education for All 2000 Assessment is that universal access to primary education is available but many are not participating. Up to 28 per cent of pupils do not complete primary school and the target of 80 per cent of qualified teachers has not yet been reached. Yet overall improvements in learning achievement in the Caribbean are good, with the exception of Haiti.

"Haiti's educational system has utterly failed for as many as half of the nation's children," says Sheldon Shaeffer of UNICEF. With classrooms so overcrowded that only one child in four has a place to sit, it is not surprising that over two-thirds of Haitian children do not complete primary school, and that the country's illiteracy rate of over 55 per cent is the highest in the Americas.

In the Caribbean as a whole, girls' enrolment exceeds that of boys, and girl pupils are outperforming boys. According to a 17-year-old youth in the Dominican Republic, many boys perceive academic achievement as 'sissy', 'effeminate' or 'nerdy'. Women's literacy rate is an estimated 85 per cent and three-quarters of primary school teachers are female. Taken with girls' high achievement, this sends a clear message about mothers and teachers as positive role models. ■

For children in rural areas unreached by education systems, decentralization has played a crucial role in improving access to learning.

