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DIVERSITY AND EQUITY: REVIEW TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, POVERTY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA: 1994-2004, EDITED BY GILLETTE HALL AND HARRY A. PATRINOS



INTRODUCTION

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The Inter-American Conference on Social Security (CISS) and Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA) co-hosted an international conference on “The Quality of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean” in February 2007. The conference examined the quality of education in the region, the determinants of learning, policy and program evaluation, and the impact of quality of education on the labor market. Education quality is recognized as a major determinant of the well-being of nations, as they attempt to improve productivity and their place in the global economy. Learning and schooling attainment are a significant determinant of earnings ability. The challenge for researchers is to understand the policies that improve learning outcomes. A better understanding of how learning can be improved will help countries in the region enact effective policies. This second issue contains four additional papers originally presented at the conference. The first six were published in volume 3, number 1 of this journal.

Furio Rosati and M. Rossi assess the impact that two different types of policy interventions, that is school quality and conditional cash transfers, have on child labor and school attendance in rural Mexico. While there are many studies of the impact of Mexico’s well known conditional cash transfer program, *Oportunidades*, on schooling attainment, little evidence is available on whether school quality programs such as Mexico’s rural compensatory schooling program operated for the Secretariat of Public Education by the federal agency CONAFE, also reduce child labor and help keep children in school longer. Furio and Rossi construct a panel using *Oportunidades* and CONAFE data for the period 1997 to 2000. Their strategy involves estimating a model for child labor and schooling, both for primary school-aged children and adolescents. In this way, they are able to control for differential impacts of the program on schooling by age of beneficiary child. The findings suggest that school quality programs are not only effective in increasing school attendance, but also act as deterrents to child labor, especially for children of secondary school age.

Lucrecia Santibañez and Brenda Jarillo Rabling take on the important but difficult to research topic of the role of the teachers union in Mexico. Theory would suggest that in countries with only one union the monopolistic position would greatly benefit the union, and not always in ways consistent with the goals of greater efficiency and improved quality. The national teachers union in Mexico, known as the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (SNTE), represents over 1 million members and is the largest union in Latin America. Santibañez and Jarillo explore the role of SNTE on student achievement using data from national standardized student exams, and the relationship between various measures of union influence and education quality. Despite data limitations, the authors show that SNTE is not a monolithic entity. Fragmentation and conflict among union sections are more strongly and negatively related to student test scores than only union membership per se. Having dissident sections or having two or more politically opposed union sections in a state, is a significant predictor of negative student results.

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Husein Abdul-Hamid assesses Argentina's Preparedness for the knowledge economy through a measurement of student knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics and science using PISA 2000. PISA is becoming a very useful tool for assessing learning outcomes. The 2000 PISA results show that while Argentine students performed similar to their peers in most other Latin American countries, they lagged behind all OECD and most of the other participating countries. Abdul-Hamid uses comprehensive modeling and analysis of education production functions, using least squares and quantile regressions methods, to show that student performance in Argentina is associated mostly with school and learning climate, the quality of teachers, and whether students are encouraged, guided and oriented to be effective learners. The findings show evidence of significant relationships that need future follow-up to investigate how each indicator is affecting performance.

Luciano Di Gresia and co-authors study the labor market performance of public university graduates in Argentina. The study focuses on the transition from university to the labor market. Their results demonstrate that in general women receive higher returns to university study. Also, foreigners, single people, having attended a private secondary school, and having parents with more education, are factors associated with higher returns. They also show that finance is important; receiving a scholarship along with family support is associated with greater returns. Lower returns are associated with students relying on only a scholarship, or students working while attending university and receiving family support, or only relying on their family to finance their education. Interestingly, no relationship is found between the quality of the institution and returns to schooling.

These two volumes tell us a lot about education in Latin America. They tell us that political inequality across the Latin America and Caribbean region is important for explaining primary school enrollment rates. They also tell us that the returns to education are higher for those who attended private schools, at least in Peru and Argentina. This will further lead to increased inequality, given that people from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to attend private institutions, at least in Colombia.

In Argentina, while the expansion of basic education through the reorganization of school structure and the extension of compulsory schooling led to improvements, two studies using the 2000 PISA data show that there is an urgent need to intervene to improve learning outcomes. Actions need to focus on addressing gender issues, since girls perform significantly better than boys in reading, while boys perform better in math. In addition, policymakers need to motivate teachers' commitment and engagement to their work, their relationships with students, and their openness to institutional change.

We also learned that in Mexico, teacher unions are important, though an under-studied topic – at least among economists. Yet, one of the studies finds that good relations between states and unions, along with a good accountability system at the state level, are important for improving outcomes.

Finally, a lot has been learned, but a lot more needs to be done. The articles in the two volumes represent some of the important work going on in the region. They also represent the beginnings of a research program aiming to guide policy on what works to improve the quality of education in Latin America.