

Considerations as to secondary education, school dropout and youth in the context of the pandemic in Argentina^{1 2 3}

Considerações sobre o ensino médio, a evasão escolar e a juventude no contexto da pandemia na Argentina

Consideraciones sobre la educación secundaria, la deserción escolar y la juventud en el contexto de la pandemia en Argentina

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¹ Responsible Editor: Wivian Weller. <<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1450-2004>>

² References correction and bibliographic normalization services and English Revision: Marcela Margarita Mazzei <targetyourengishclasses@gmail.com>, Constanza Díaz Renyi <cdiazrenyi@gmail.com>

³ Funding: Fondo para la Investigación Científica y Tecnológica (FONCYT), en el marco del Programa Juventud de la Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) - sede Argentina.

Abstract

Historically, the Latin American region presents evident social and educational inequalities that are represented in the educational trajectories of its youth populations; conditions that seem to be exacerbated in a pandemic. The objective of this text is to analyze the situation of secondary education in Latin America and in Argentina, in particular. To that end, regional data is provided referring to the family educational environment, geographical region, age and the characteristics of the educational institution matrix that refer to and constitute abandonment processes. Finally, this article advances on a series of contributions as to young people and feelings in pandemic context that endow the conclusions aimed at exploring renewed lines of approach to the study of education and youth.

Keywords: youth, secondary education, school dropout, pandemic, Latin America, Argentina

Resumo

Historicamente, a região latino-americana apresenta evidentes desigualdades sociais e educacionais que estão representadas nas trajetórias educacionais de suas populações juvenis; condições que parecem ser exacerbadas em uma pandemia. O objetivo deste texto é analisar a situação da educação secundária na América Latina e na Argentina, em particular. Para melhor, separe os dados regionais e a extensão do entorno educativo familiar, a região geográfica, a datada e as características da matriz da instituição educativa que faz referência e constitui os processos de educação. Finalmente, este artigo avança em uma série de aportes em torno dos jovens e sentimentos em pandemia que dotam as conclusões encaminadas para explorar linhas novas de aproximação ao estúdio da educação e da juventude.

Palavras-chave: *juventude, ensino médio, evasão escolar, pandemia, América Latina, Argentina*

Resumen

Históricamente, la región latinoamericana presenta evidentes desigualdades sociales y educativas que se encuentran representadas en las trayectorias educativas de sus poblaciones jóvenes; condiciones que parecen exacerbarse en una pandemia. El objetivo de este texto es analizar la situación de la educación secundaria en América Latina y en Argentina, en particular. Para ello, se aportan datos referidos al entorno educativo familiar, la región geográfica, la edad y las características de la matriz de la institución educativa que constituyen procesos de abandono. Finalmente, este artículo avanza en una serie de aportes en torno a los jóvenes y sentimientos en pandemia que orientan las conclusiones a explorar líneas renovadas de acercamiento al estudio de la educación y la juventud.

Palabras clave: *juventud, educación secundaria, deserción escolar, pandemia, América Latina, Argentina*

Introduction

The Latin American region presents, as one of its most notorious historical features, pronounced social and educational inequalities that are represented in the trajectories of youth populations. Such trajectories are presented as inequalities in the schooling transition whereby the school dropout phenomenon occurs. Such phenomenon is strengthened by evident inequalities that characterize the educational system. In that regard, data of international documents provide material traces to notice the size of this critical situation without disregarding the fact that, globally, we are part of societies undermined by the imperatives of an unprecedented crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic; the particular features of the regional context predict the deepening of inequalities and school dropout. The context of the pandemic⁴, on the one hand, exposes existing inequalities that endow school dropout and, on the other, contributes to the deepening of such inequalities enhancing an inflection point as to the feelings of young people. In this sense, recent documents analyze the social tendencies that preceded the pandemic and intend to come closer to the economic and social effects that shall

⁴ In January 30th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID-19 was a public health emergency of international importance. The first case in the region was detected in Brazil on February 25th, 2020 and, upon cases being reported in all continents on a community scale, on March 11th, the WHO declared that the COVID-19 outbreak could be characterized as a pandemic. Even if such outbreak is constantly evolving, available data indicate that Latin America and the Caribbean has been one of the regions of the world most affected by the coronavirus in terms of not only the number of cases but also as to the number of deaths. Even if, in 2020, only 8.4% of the world population lives in such region, by December of such year, 18.6% of the COVID-19 infections and 27.8% of the deaths caused by such virus were concentrated there. ECLAC, 2020, p. 13 Data available as at December 31st, 2020 [online] <https://covid19.who.int/>.

become its legacy⁵, in a region where we can observe a matrix of social inequality that is founded upon linchpins such as the social and economic level, gender, age, territorial belonging, amongst others, that are expressed in multiple combinations and predict as to different degrees of vulnerability and suffering.

The youth population is one of the sectors most widely affected by the intersection of vulnerabilities marked in different vital areas and has also been affected by the closure of person attendance at school during the term of the pandemic (Cardini and D'Alessandre, 2020). In 2020, the pandemic brought about a massive closure of educational institutions as a measure to prevent and stop transmission. Around 1,100 million students and youth around the world were affected by the closure of educational institutions (IESALC, UNESCO, 2020). In Argentina, the government measure as to the Compulsory Preventive Social Isolation (ASPO, as per its initials in Spanish) has created different types of impacts. Class suspension as a measure to stop the spreading of the virus was one of the changes that caused most disruptions to everyday life. In that sense, it is acknowledged that the effects on everyday life result in deepening preexisting social and educational inequalities, intensifying processes of school dropout and impacting on feelings of young people. This text analyzes the inequalities of the educational system in the Latin American region so as to provide context to the particular case of Argentina regarding processes of school dropout, deepened by the pandemic and its impact on the feelings of young people.

In this text, we shall present the structure and methodology of an investigation the main topic of which is school dropout. In that regard, we shall review the situation of the Latin American region by considering the scenario before the pandemic regarding education, especially focusing on trajectories and completions. Such reconstruction shall be made upon the basis of documents of international entities and according to different theoretical perspectives. After that, we shall delve into the situation in Argentina in terms of what occurs in secondary school. To that purpose, information is analyzed of both official statistics created by the Argentine National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC, as per its initials in Spanish)

⁵ Between 2014-2019, the GDP of Latin America and the Caribbean increased an average of only 0.3% annually (ECLAC, 2020a). In Latin America, extreme poverty increased from 7.8% to 11.3% of the population and poverty from 27.8% to 30.5%” (ECLAC, 2020, p.14). In addition, in a recent ECLAC report of 2020 projections as to social and economic indicators of Latin America and the Caribbean show a very complex scenario. A strong economic recession results in an aggravation of life conditions as well as substantial increases in unemployment, poverty and inequalities.

and by the National Ministry of Education, as well as by a series of documents drafted by different organizations and entities that created materials regarding the situation of young people in the pandemic, throughout the term from 2020 to 2021. Finally, we shall discuss the path explored this far and suggest a series of new issues that have arisen and consider the situation of young people regarding school dropout and emotions in the pandemic context.

Methodological framework

From the educational field, dropout is and has been a problem that is posed as a sign requiring attention and intervention as to education policies. Even if Argentina, in the Latin American region, shows an encouraging performance regarding both the extension of the secondary school enrollment rate and its compulsory nature because the middle/secondary school cycle is part of formal mandatory schooling since Law No. 26,206 (2006) was passed, the fact that a percentage of the population is still unable to graduate from secondary school continues to be an issue that demands attention.

This article is part of an ongoing investigation project designed before the pandemic, entitled “School dropout: A study of the framework of events and experiences in the processes of school interruptions of young persons in secondary school of the City of Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires Area” [*“Abandono escolar: Un estudio sobre los entramados de eventos y experiencias, en los procesos de interrupciones escolares con jóvenes de escuela secundaria de CABA y Gran Buenos Aires”*],⁶ financed by the Scientific and Technological Investigation Fund (FONCYT, as per its initials in Spanish), that shall be executed between 2021 and 2024, within the scope of the Youth Program [*Programa Juventud*] of the Latin American University of Social Sciences (FLACSO, as per its initials in Spanish) – Argentine site. The general objective is to contribute to the discussion of school dropout processes through a cross-sectional observational study of young people that attend/have attended secondary school. In particular, the study delves into processes of school interruption/re-entry of young people between 15 and 17 years of age that have attended secondary school in the City of Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area in the 2021 – 2024 term.

⁶ Project PICT 2019-03906 financed by FONCYT, Agency of Sciences and Technical Matters of the National Ministry of Science [*Agencia de Ciencias y Técnica del Ministerio Nacional de Ciencia*], Argentina.

In this framework, this article represents a step forward of such investigation and is oriented by a series of hypothesis that shall be analyzed in this text. As a first hypothesis, it is formulated that it is not possible to suggest only one factor as the main cause of school dropout; on the contrary, school dropout forms part of a process which has many contributing factors. A second hypothesis poses that feelings expressed in the context of the pandemic deepen meaning gaps and aggravate preexisting inequalities as to family conditions, possibilities of educational accompaniment at home and social and emotional conditions of support in furtherance of pedagogical continuity. As part of a first stage of the state of the art in the matter, in this text we plan to approach the nucleus of ideas that are frequently held regarding this phenomenon, we try to summarize and broaden ideas by introducing new questions specific to the current context and the critical situation that our societies are going through during the pandemic; all driven by the objective of analyzing the situation of secondary school in Latin America and, specifically, in Argentina. To that end, we use secondary data sources made up of official statistics created through both the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC, as per initials in Spanish) and the National Ministry of Education, as well as by a series of documents drafted by different organizations and entities that created materials regarding the situation of young people in the pandemic, throughout the term from 2020 to 2021.

Educational context in Latin America in the last decade: school dropout as a multicausal process

In this section, we cover the main dimensions that constitute school dropout in Latin America. Such dimensions refer to the following: *geographical region, household income level and the school institutional matrix*. As posed in the first investigation hypothesis, school dropout is not determined by a single factor; on the contrary, it refers to a process which has multiple contributing factors. Within the main principal distinguishing dimensions, we find the geographical region, income level, age and characteristics of the institutional matrix, especially, that of high school level.

If we consider the trends prior to the pandemic in the Latin American region, there is an increase in the coverage of education, together with a greater number of retention difficulties at the end of the school cycle that vary according to each country. In that regard, we identify

three educational scenarios: one with solid and extensive school trajectories, with high levels of access and retention (such as in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru); a second scenario characterized by a high level of access but a low retention level (referred to countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay) or, in turn, a low level of access but a high level of retention (such as in the cases of Panama and Paraguay); and finally, a third educational scenario characterized by short and frail school trajectories, with low levels of access and retention (as in Nicaragua and Honduras) (Benza and Kessler, 2021).

Apart from any differences, the educational systems of many Latin American countries share, to a greater or lesser extent, the following features: an insufficient coverage of pre-school education, a high access to the basic cycle and scarce retention capacity both in the primary and secondary levels. In such way, repetition and school delay –phenomena that frequently precede dropout– together with low learning levels of basic learning content determine educational trajectories and a consequent social and labor insertion. In terms of school trajectories, its negative effects accumulate throughout the school cycle affecting opportunities of well-being in an uneven manner, mainly, within the poorest sectors. Consequently, unequal opportunities tend to replicate from one generation to the next, enabling social factors occurring in the school environment and exerting fundamental influence in future possibilities of development and the harnessing of opportunities within the social environment (Espíndola and León, 2002).

Regarding the *dimension of the geographical region* in Latin America as to secondary school level, as shown by the data of the Information System of Educational Tendencies in Latin America (SITEAL, as per its initials in Spanish), there is a strong trend to finish school in the urban sector over the rural sector, throughout time. This shows that the geographical region works as an explanatory criterion that enables an understanding of educational inequalities. In this regard, inequality is understood in terms of processes or phenomena of exclusion, intermittent interruption and decoupling of persons and/or social groups as to access, permanence and completion of the education system and, in particular, that of secondary school education. In that regard, it is worth highlighting that processes of educational homogenization result in difficulties to process school trajectories, in terms of the territory. In the scope of this tendency, polarization phenomena may be found, to a greater or lesser extent, in the completion rates of the urban area compared to the rural area rates. Such polarization implies the existing differences between completion rates as per the geographical region; in some countries, such difference is greater than in others. On that matter, Bolivia is a country that shows a larger

divergence as to completion between both areas because, in 2018, the completion rate of the urban areas was 82, while the rate of study completion in the rural area was 56.1. In turn, such phenomenon is also present in Paraguay because, in such same year, completion rate in the urban area was 73.1 and such rate in the rural area was 47.9. In turn, Peru is one of the countries that show fewer differentials regarding completion between both areas because, in 2018, the completion rate of secondary school studies in the urban area was of 89.7, while such rate was of 70.7 in the rural area.

Thereupon, there is a tradition in the education system whereby education policies in Latin America have stood on the premise that all schools within the scope of State action are similar. Thereby, features of standard urban schools are conferred to schools in the rural and marginal urban areas. Consequently, institutions are not considered to be shaped by the communities within which they interact, in a particular and different manner. Thus, the "school culture" (Rockwell, 2006) of each institution is different and has its peculiarities according to the type of organization, of the stakeholders present and their way of interacting. This idea takes the view that individuals, agents and stakeholders that intervene in the institution have similar characteristics: same experiences and insights, similar family, economic and social status, analogous forms of interrelation. That is, they base on behavior and integral development patterns of individuals according to previously defined homogeneous models. However, the institutional and individual "homogeneous" criterion contradicts a basic premise that brings together different realities: experience, individuals' every-day life, and practices and relationships of each institution that are far from being homogeneous and linear in urban and rural settings (Chávez, 1995).

Regarding the *dimension of income level*, as per the data of the Information System of Educational Tendencies in Latin America (SITEAL), income level is another dimension that, jointly with the geographical area, constitute the possibilities of secondary school completion. This implies that a greater income level results in a greater completion rate, maintained over time. Within this phenomenon and, in particular, we acknowledge different groups of countries that show significant differences between rates within the same income level, even if greater completion rates still remain in sectors of greater incomes. That determines different degrees of dispersion between countries regarding differences as to secondary school completion rates in lower income levels in comparison with completion rates in higher income rates. Amongst the countries that show greater dispersion of study completion rates between both opposite ends,

we find Argentina and Colombia, whose data have remained the same through time. In Argentina, secondary school completion rate for 30% of low-level incomes was 45.4, in 2010, and 55.3, in 2018; in 2010, as per 30 % of middle-income levels, it was 60.9 and 74, in 2018; and, in 2010, as per 40% of high-income level, completion rate was 85.8, and 91.7, in 2018. In turn, in Colombia, secondary school completion rate as per 30% of low-income levels was 55.8 in 2010 and 69.1, in 2018. As to 30% of middle-income level, completion rate in 2010 was 71.4 and 80.6, in 2018. Finally, regarding 40% of higher incomes, study completion rates of such level was 88.1, in 2010, and used to be 91.7, in 2018. On the other hand, amongst countries with a lower dispersion rate at opposite ends of the spectrum, compared to the abovementioned countries, there is Peru: as per 30% of lower income levels, completion rate in 2010 was 72.5 and 82.4, in 2018; as per 30% of middle-incomes, in 2010 the completion rate was 85.8 and 88.9, in 2018; and as per 40% of higher incomes, in 2010 the completion rate was 92.2 and 96.3, in 2018.

In that regard, it is argued that processes of educational homogenization, under the motto of equality and a sense of public dimension in education, have created ways of organizing schooling trajectories and its possibilities determined by structural factors that have had an impact on young people's education achievements in a segmented way, depending if they live in rural or urban areas or according to the family income level. On this point, structural changes disorganize the arena in which institutions and individuals move and create disparity as to positions and strategies that are not necessarily different due to social stratus; rather, on more than one occasion, differences arise in groups of different social sectors. In the matrix of egalitarian education, there is an underlying pattern to process the dispute as to social assets that is related with a social cooperation scheme based on the confrontation of individual resources (Tiramonti, 2007).

Regarding the *dimension of the institutional matrix* of secondary school, it shall be noted that the concept of "a box" where students enter and graduates finish with a certain profile as per homogeneous frameworks has been greatly superseded. It basically consists of a social space where processes are created, developed and featured by communication acts that express heterogeneity, differences and particularities specific to the community within which the school is set and of which it is part, as well as to the individuals that interact thereto (Chaves, 1995). To this regard, it shall be noted that whilst, for some, that which is transmitted at school (both at a moral and cognitive level, at an instrumental and expressive level) coincides, is

acknowledged, respected and amplified by what is occurring within their family and extracurricular environment, for others, it implies a collision, relinquishment and/or constant struggle. While for some families there are material and symbolic continuities in school and life, for others, they form part of two different worlds, even opposite. Therefore, inequality gaps are explained by meaning gaps, by distances as to the conditions required for the school to be able to play its role of transmitting relevant knowledge and abilities for all (Tarabini, 2020). In effect, the manner in which dynamics and practices at school are posed such as, for example, stakeholders' action according to common objectives, management style, institutional environment, the way decisions are made, stakeholders' participation in the coordination of teaching-learning processes, amongst others, are dimensions that contribute, in a great extent, to the academic performance of an institution and, consequently, in students' performance as to their social and educational trajectories.

As seen, to the structural dimensions of the geographical area and income level, we should add an institutional dimension that allows us to explain how educational trajectories in secondary school may be solved, eventually, according to age groups and cause the overage phenomenon. As per the data available in the Information System of Educational Tendencies in Latin America (SITEAL), an inversely proportional correlation exists between the educational environment and overage rate that remains the same through time. That is, the better the educational environment of student, the lesser chance that the overage phenomenon appears in a student forming part of a high-quality educational environment.

Even if this feature presents similar trends in all of the Latin American region, in some countries, overage rates in a low and medium quality educational environment are relatively homogeneous; whilst in other countries there are marked differences between low, medium and high levels, persistent over time. In the first case, Argentina presents a greater concentration of overage in medium and high levels: as at 2010, overage rate in low quality educational environments was 38.7%, in medium quality environments it was 36% and, with a marked difference, 15.5% of overage was found in cases of high-quality educational environments. In turn, in 2018, 42.4% of trajectories with overage were found in the lower level and, with an almost identical percentage, 41.8% were found for medium quality educational environments; however, a smaller percentage was given in cases of a lower quality educational environment: that of 15.9% of the students corresponding to such level.

On the other hand, it shall be noted that there are countries where differences in percentage of overage students in high, medium and low-quality educational environments are markedly greater in the three environmental levels and persistent over time. Such is the case of Peru that, in 2010, the percentage of overage students in a low-quality educational level is 35.2%, in a medium quality educational level it is 17.8% and, in a high-quality educational level, it is 4.1%. In 2018, marked differences amongst the three educational environment levels remain conspicuous: 21.9% corresponds to overage students of low-quality environments, 12.8% to medium level and, finally, 2.8% for high-quality levels.

In the framework of this scenario, divisions by age imply arbitrary social constructions that set limits and produce an order determining who should take which place. The educational system has established a category, such as age, to draw a frontier between those belonging to different groups or classes. Separation by class or course groups together people deemed to be the same and sets apart those who are different, thereby establishing homogeneity as to age, interests, social, cultural and ethnic profiles, etc. Division and segmentation of time, space, content and individuals mark an educational model based on classification. Denaturalization of such classification implies considering such young people going through schools in a different manner (Servetto and Bossio, 2019; Corica and Otero, 2020; Corica and Otero, 2018). As Terigi (2008) says, a theoretical trajectory that marks or defines the age required for an individual taking a certain class many a time does not match the real trajectory of students; therefore, there are different ways of solving such phase lag, according to different institutional profiles that are characterized by different institutional ideologies and styles.

The dimensions mentioned so far show the status of the situation as to what happens to young people entering school, for how many of such persons the real duration of each educational trajectory concurs with the relevant theoretical duration, how many of them graduate within the expected time frame, abstracting away from processes that are developed inside such black boxes that make up school institutions (Krichesky and Benchimol, 2008). Thus, to the geographical and income level dimensions we add the age factor upon which the institutional matrix itself is organized and intervenes in the building of selection and classification forms that are related with educational trajectories.

Secondary school education in Argentina: overage and grade repetition

This section shows overage and grade repetition data that enable the characterization of secondary school level from a perspective of the margins of the educational system, referred to such trajectories presenting non hegemonic ways of passing through such level. Thus, we are able to broaden our understanding of secondary education in Argentina from the characteristics of the different ways educational institutions process educational trajectories, whereby overage and repetition phenomena constitute different options of transiting through school for such trajectories divorced from the theory, currently still organized in homogenization circuits that act as possible predictors of the school dropout phenomenon.

Young persons' educational trajectories present various phenomena related with school dropout. Such phenomena consist of different ways in which young people connect with secondary school and refer to cumulative, dynamic and progressive processes that draw them out of school. In this way, categories such as overage and repetition arise in Argentina —data which is presented in this section— shed light on the complex process of school dropout and the multiple social and educational phenomena related thereto.

In this regard, we can see two principal tendencies that concentrate overage principally in sectors with a low and medium quality educational environment. On the one hand, there is a directly proportional tendency, over time, as to overage students and the educational environment at home. In 2010, for the Greater Buenos Aires area, representing the greater part of the educational system in Argentina, 26.1 of students with two or more years of overage show a low-quality educational environment, while 17.1 of overage students show a high-quality educational environment and, in turn, the percentage amounts to 31.3 as to students with a medium-quality educational environment at home. This trend continues and deepens through the years, provided that, in 2018, 36.9 percent of students with overage had a low-quality educational environment, 39.4 percent had a medium-quality educational environment, and the percentage decreased to 14.4 for such overage students with a high-quality educational environment.

Conversely, another trend related with overage constitutes a differentiating factor of such phenomenon: region. To this regard, as per the latest data available from SITEAL, for

2018, the overage map in Argentina is divided into three large groups of regions: in the first place, the North-East region concentrates the greater quantity of overage students, we find 55% of students with two or more years of overage with a low-quality educational environment, 53.9 percent of overage students with a medium-quality educational environment and 15.4 of overage students with a low-quality educational environment. In turn, the Greater Buenos Aires area concentrates the lowest number of overage students, provided that, in 2018, percentages are maintained from 36.9 to 39.4 for students with a low and medium-quality educational environment, and 14.4 for students with a high-level educational environment. Finally, there is a group of regions that concentrate intermediate levels of overage, whose percentages are around 40 percent. It is essential to remember that the region that concentrates the greatest overage is the North East, with percentages of more than 50 percent and the region that concentrates lesser overage is the Greater Buenos Aires area, with percentages of around 30 percent. Consequently, the regions with intermediate percentages are the North East, Cuyo, the Pampa region and Patagonia. For example, in the region of Patagonia in Argentina, for 2018, overage students of a low-quality educational environment correspond to 46.6 percent, overage students with a medium-quality educational environment correspond to 46.8 percent and overage students with high-quality educational environment amount to 21 percent.

In this framework, educational environment not only determines completion processes but it also determines phenomena such as overage that arise from a determined institutional matrix that forces homogenization and is processed through gradation organized by age and, on the other hand, by family, social and educational determining factors oriented at achieving greater educational goals in so far there are greater educational and cultural conditions determining the meaning of getting through and completing secondary school.

In this regard, it is argued that many young persons currently going through school are far from the theoretical age they should have to be able to take each year or grade. Overage is a trait that currently still defines the population that attends schools of all levels and there is a clear correlation: the greater the students' level of poverty, the greater overage. Moreover, it is acknowledged that at the secondary level there are few experiences that interfere with the System's gradation. Traditionally, in secondary school, courses are annual and if a student fails March exams regarding certain subjects, he or she must repeat and take the complete one-year course again (and not only the failed subjects). Such instances, undoubtedly associated with the

system's gradation and annual structure, give rise to overage, slow down young persons' school trajectories and, in many cases, end up in school dropout (Krichesky and Benchimol, 2008).

Overage is related to another educational phenomenon present in the organization of young persons' trajectories at school and that is eminently school related: repetition. Such phenomenon is a device to maintain school transiting in order in so far it is supposed to have an annual and grade structure. As per the latest data available from the National Ministry of Education, it can be noted that repetition, at a national level, is concentrated in the Buenos Aires conurbation. Out of the total repeat students in Argentina, for 2019, 26% of them live in the conurbation. This can be explained by the population density (the more inhabitants, the more repeat students); moreover, it should be noted that a polarization exists as to repetition according to the geographical area. For example, while in the City of Buenos Aires repeat students consist of 4% of those students in secondary education, in the Buenos Aires conurbation, the percentage amounts to 11% of repeat students that enroll in such level during the last years. In 2019, out of 3,866,041 students attending secondary school, 377,632 students are retaking a year of study. The largest concentrations of repeat students are located in provinces such as Buenos Aires, the greatest educational system of Argentina: out of 1,573,550 attending students to the relevant level, 157,596 are repeat students. In Córdoba, out of 332,713 students attending secondary school, 22,484 students are retaking a year of study. In Santa Fe, out of 248,270 students attending secondary school, 28,622 are repeat students. In Salta, out of 126,926 students attending such level, 13,723 are repeat students. In Mendoza, out of 133,534 students attending primary school, 11,578 are repeat students.

Among the provinces with a smaller number of repeat students, we find those with less enrollment in secondary level. Anyway, it may be noted that there are territories where the rate of repeat students is considerably greater in terms of percentages. Such is the case of Santa Cruz where, out of 29,578 students, 5,066 are repeat students, amounting to 17% of the enrolled students taking such level. In turn, and in comparative terms, in San Luis, out of 49,488 students attending such level, 3,936 make up 8% of the enrolled students attending such level. Consequently, and taking the case of secondary school level in a province in the region of Cuyo, such as San Luis, and a province within the region of Patagonia, such as Santa Cruz, we find significant variations in their enrollment percentages regarding repeat students. That shows that, in some territories, repetition is a strategy strongly reinforced in their provincial educational

systems of such level in order to legitimize the traditional homogeneity, gradation and annual structure of such level.

The percentage of repetition is a performance indicator that shows, in relative terms, the number of enrolled students in a study year that are unable to pass and have to reenroll again the following year as repeat students. It is acknowledged that repetition and overage rates are many times used as criteria to measure education's internal and external efficiency and are related with a particular concept of educational quality. They are variables that arise from causal deterministic relationships and that integrate quality as an abstract, neutral and objective concept for any institution or society. However, it shall be noted that in this study we understand that the concept of quality is not neutral, essential and immutable; in fact, it consists of a value judgement that reports a certain educational process or result, characterized by its relativity. From this perspective, if the concept of quality is relative and may hardly admit a complete and final definition, quality education refers more to daily interactions occurring at school, the institutional environment within which such processes appear, conditions and situations that foster construction, interpretation and transformation of knowledge in the institution than to learning or repeating certain types of content (Chávez, 1995; Krichesky and Benchimol, 2008).

In this framework, it is noted that repetition and overage have become quite frequent in secondary school. Henceforth, school trajectories of young persons, especially –but not exclusively– among the most vulnerable sectors from a social and economic standpoint, are increasingly choppy and interrupted and less linear. The repetition of a study year seems to be the most frequent answer to a low academic performance or repeated absences. Repetition implies having to go through the same teaching situations that have led to failure, without any analysis of the factors that justify such determination and without offering, in many cases, a proposal that addresses relevant learning needs. It must also be acknowledged that, in the usual practice, as mentioned above, teaching is done in ways that are very distant and many a time incomprehensible for young people, principally for those who have had little exposure to the written language or to the use of numbers in their early childhood.

The arguments developed so far confirm that in secondary schooling processes multiple factors converge: some which are specific features of young people and their social and economic situations (out of school factors), and others which relate more with the characteristics of the educational system itself and of the institutional matrix (intraschool

factors). Moreover, different data enables to confirm that we are facing heterogenous, multidimensional and accumulative processes that refer to a group of phenomena and situations established through time, such as processes of differential access to secondary school, different ways students have of (dis) connecting with school, heterogeneous educational trajectories that are a long way from expected or theoretical trajectories, overage and repetition strategies offered by the school upon such trajectories. Segregation and fragmentation occur between and within institutions according to the geographical region and the family income level.

Young people and their feelings

In this section, we present data as to sociability status and feelings of young people in the context of the pandemic. One of the hypotheses we sustain acknowledges that feelings expressed in the context of a pandemic deepen meaning gaps and aggravate preexisting inequalities as to family conditions, possibilities of educational accompaniment at home and social and emotional conditions of support in furtherance of pedagogical continuity. As we show below, a group of data aim at enriching knowledge as to social and emotional dimensions in the context of a pandemic and are targeted at consolidating the hypothesis that is hereby sustained.

Among young people of 15 and 29 years of age in the Latin American region, worries and uncertainties as to their current and future well-being were the two most notable topics. More than 1 out of 4 young persons express their concern as to their financial situation or that of their family; such percentage increases in the case of young persons of ages between 25 and 29 years old and, especially, in young males. Another main concern, in particular for adolescents and young indigenous people, is that of their situation regarding continuity, delay and study dropout. Moreover, in addition to the concern as to family health, there is stress resulting from distance learning, loss of income and difficulty to find a job in the current scenario. In this sense, registered data in the region show that 52% of young persons have experienced more stress and 47% declare to have had moments full of anxiety and panic. 20% of young people from 15 to 29 years of age state that they would like to receive psychological support from health services due to stress or anxiety suffered from the current situation. This affects almost a quarter of the population of young persons with disabilities (23.5%) and young people belonging to the

lesbian, gay, bisexuals, transgender, intersex and queer group (LGBTIQ) (24.3%). That is, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a strong impact on the health of, especially, the young population (ECLAC, 2020).

Report of ECLAC-Unicef 2020

Concerns	Feelings	Problems
Financial and economic situation at home	Anxiety, panic, stress	Difficulty finding work
Family health	Solidarity, empathy	School dropout and delay

Source: own elaboration

Moreover, young persons express positive feelings such as solidarity and empathy and declare that they are participating in spaces in order to “mitigate and approach the pandemic’s social and economic impacts on their communities”. This mainly concerns volunteer work promoted by state agencies and civil society organizations. More than a third of young persons declare to have been involved or led some kind of action in response to COVID-19, with a wider participation of young persons for the age group between 25 and 29 years. This accounts for an opportunity available to societies to acknowledge adolescents and young persons as actors of change and driving force of a new model of sustainable development (ECLAC, 2020).

In Argentina, it is acknowledged that the population from the most precarious social and economic sectors is the most harmed by the crisis and the rise in violence against children and adolescents, associated with cohabitation and suspension of physical classes (IIGG, 2020)⁷. Moreover, the pandemic and the lockdown have created a sense of “time warp” for young persons, with a greater impact than in adults, in so far they determine and postpone the possibility of a future according to a plan. The “lockdown” created by the ASPO limited adolescents’ possibilities of interacting and, as a result, reduced their horizon of possibilities, cut short expressions of fear and deepened violence that is “secretized” due to the lockdown.

As to mental health care, many accompaniments were interrupted and the same occurred regarding attendance in daycare centers, for example. Lockdown has also resulted in

⁷ Report of the Observatory of adolescents and young people [*Observatorio de adolescentes y jóvenes*], Gino Germani Investigation Institute [*Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani*], “Pandemia en Argentina. El tiempo detenido de adolescentes y jóvenes”, June 2020.

lack of protection, in so far more domestic violence has been recorded from March to May during the pandemic (Observatorio, 2020). Surely, isolation and lockdown in such first months of 2020 in the midst of the quarantine and ASPO, overcrowding at home, economic problems and lack of privacy have fostered tension but, also, preexisting conditions of the pandemic made adolescents and young persons vulnerable and defenseless.

As to cohabitation, the more people in the household, the greater percentage of cohabitation is described as “bad”. 34.8% acknowledges being unable to talk to anyone at home about their feelings (the older the age, the less the possibility of dialogue). 40% mentioned their mother as the person with whom they can talk about these issues; this is explained by the role played by women in care and support tasks within the household (Bazán, Brückner, Giacomazzo, Gutiérrez and Maffeo, 2020).⁸

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Concerns	Feelings	Problems
Financial and economic situation at home	Anxiety, panic,	Difficulty finding work
Family health	Boredom, sadness	
Overcrowding at home	Intolerance	Lack of privacy, greater strain on cohabitation
Failed future plans	Stress	Failed and truncated projects
Connectivity and vocational doubts as to what they are beginning to study	Solidarity, empathy	School dropout and delay

Source: own elaboration

Conversely, young persons between 14 and 21 years old, the majority (65.1%) of the residents of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA, as per initials in Spanish) during isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic⁹, as to their activities, use of time and space in the domestic environment, in addition to their emotions, chose their room as their perfect spot at

⁸ From this report we can highlight other relevant data: 79% affirmed to have a planned routine or a routine of some kind; this is observed more the younger the age and it could be explained by school organization and adults' help, 88,3% agree or agree very much with isolation measures, that is, ASPO and 65,8% responded that their health (physical, mental, emotional or social) were affected by isolation, with a greater impact among those of older age.

⁹ Tapia, S. A. (2020) “Entre recomendaciones y rutinas: Jóvenes #encasa durante la cuarentena”, Technical report of the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, May 2020.

home tied in with the possibility of being alone and having a private moment. Among their activities, the use of social networks appears in the first place, followed by studying, virtual classes and, after that, series and films. As to emotions, the most mentioned words were boredom, sorrow and anxiety. Later, some words appeared regarding love, family and tranquility to share, for example, through online games. In some cases, these emotions alternate at different times (Tapia, 2020).

Regarding educational institutions and accompaniment¹⁰, most young persons affirm having received activities to study at home from their educational institutions during the quarantine period. The means of contact mostly used in the interaction between students and their educational institutions are through online platforms, WhatsApp application and e-mail. In the case of secondary schools, there is a record that only 7% is making use of the webpage *Seguimos Educando*, and 18% is providing printed material for students with no connectivity (principally, schools in the Province of Buenos Aires). In most cases, contacts were made by “sending instructions as to homework, exercises or practical assignments” (62% and 85%, respectively), and, to a lesser extent, by “sending corrections or feedback as to executed homework or assignments” (36% and 32%, respectively). This could indicate that the transition to distance learning by educational institutions is at an incipient stage in its development.

Even if there is a positive perspective as to students’ performance, however, both secondary schools and higher-level institutions point at obstacles related with students’ connectivity, in addition to the resources and technological knowledge available at home as one of the elements that hindered the execution of their school activities.

As to young persons’ feelings, among the different moods that stand out, we observe boredom or weariness caused by the lockdown, related with missing going school, routines and regular activities. They also state their desire to return to their classrooms and appreciate their teachers’ explanations because they felt a little stressed by excess homework received from school and/or difficulties thereto. Next, come a series of worries, such as recurrent feelings related with their personal and family health care in the context of Coronavirus and economic difficulties at home. They emphasize time shared with their family, although some also mention

¹⁰ Survey carried out by Fundación Cimientos under the motto: “We still accompany you” [*Te seguimos acompañando*]. The amount of cases surveys amounted to a total of 1,639 participants of our programs and 55 Persons in Charge of Accompaniment, Cimientos personnel that is in charge of the program’s on-site implementation, who were able to collect information of 79 secondary schools and 8 higher level institutions where our participants attend.

that familial cohabitation is difficult. Moreover, they also make reference to families' internal organization as to house chores and school homework, in addition to caregiving tasks of some of those with younger siblings or children.

Moreover, young persons acknowledge certain failed plans, especially, among young persons of more than 18 years in so far they had already decided to look for a job. Also, this adds up to the labor and/or economic difficulties experienced to date. They also mentioned difficulties specific to the transition to virtual learning among those who study, including connectivity problems, problems specific to their university's platforms, or vocational doubts as to what they are beginning to study.

As to availability of technologies at home, 37% of adolescents do not have a computer at home and 18% do not have internet signal; this emphasizes preexisting social inequalities. Also, the lack of physical classes is analyzed as a loss of school that serves as a shelter for many young persons (social role). The teachers' role becomes much more necessary in adolescents who are generally left more alone with their homework and, thus, left to their relationships with their peers and their own realities (Bazán, Brückner, Giacomazzo, Gutiérrez and Maffeo, 2020).

As shown in this section, educational continuity appears to be strongly determined by access to technology, resources at home, sociability and teachers role that becomes increasingly essential in the context of the pandemic. All of this adds up to the group of existing dimensions that, as mentioned before, determine the trajectories through the educational system, such as the dimensions of geographical region, income level and characteristics of the institutional matrix that constitute differentiating determining factors that unevenly organize trajectories through the educational system showing a wide range of completion rates as to secondary school. In this sense, the context of the pandemic has established new determinants that show with greater precision dissociation of trajectories from the educational system.

Conclusions

During the last years there had been an important increase as to access and completion of secondary school level. Achievements accomplished up to 2019 were significant and relevant as to educational possibilities provided to the young population. Indeed, some countries within the region still lagged behind a little in this aspect. But in 2020, with the expansion of Covid-19,

the scenario changed, in some places more drastically than in others. The outlook is disturbing in the current context in so far as the pandemic is still not over. The data analyzed show a discouraging scenario as to educational continuity, especially, at the secondary level where a greater school dissociation is recorded.

In the Latin American scenario, before the pandemic, educational systems shared, to a greater or lesser extent, the features of an insufficient coverage of pre-school education with a greater access to the basic cycle and a scarce retention capacity both in the primary and secondary levels. In such way, repetition and school delay –phenomena that frequently precede dropout– determine educational trajectories and a consequent social and labor insertion.

As posed in the first investigation hypothesis, the determining factor of school dropout is not only caused by one element; on the contrary, school dropout forms part of a process which has many contributing factors. Among the principal differentiating dimensions, we find the geographical area, income level, age and the characteristics of secondary schools' institutional matrix. In Latin America, for secondary level, we observed a marked tendency of completion of studies in the urban sector over the rural sector; educational permanence rate depends on the income level and family educational environment. Moreover, in Argentina, institutional characteristics such as overage and repetition occur more frequently among groups of students with a medium and low-quality educational environment. Therefore, we can affirm that processes of educational homogenization have created ways of organizing schooling trajectories and its possibilities that are determined by structural factors that have had an impact on young people's education achievements, in a segmented way.

Finally, a second hypothesis poses that feelings expressed in the context of the pandemic deepen meaning gaps and aggravate preexisting inequalities as to family conditions, possibilities of educational accompaniment at home and social and emotional support conditions in furtherance of pedagogical continuity. To this regard, educational continuity appears to be strongly determined by access to technology, resources at home, sociability and teachers' role that become increasingly essential in this context, in social and emotional scenarios characterized by feelings of anxiety, panic, sadness and boredom, all of which reinforces pedagogical difficulties to maintain meaningful relationships with the school.

Moreover, to conclude, we ask ourselves: How can the current situation be reverted? Which are the most significant aspects that should currently be addressed? What happened

and/or is happening to adolescents and young persons during the pandemic? Which were the aspects that have influenced educational continuity over and above the availability or not of IT devices? The possibility of ensuring effective compliance and guaranteeing the right to education implies overcoming the ebb and flow of adverse impacts of deepening inequalities and economic poverty that shall not be curbed only with a greater internet connection. Data show that there is still a lot more to investigate, but also a lot to work on so that access to education is maintained as a right.

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Submission data:

Submitted to evaluation on February 08, 2022; accepted for publication on 27 June 2022.

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