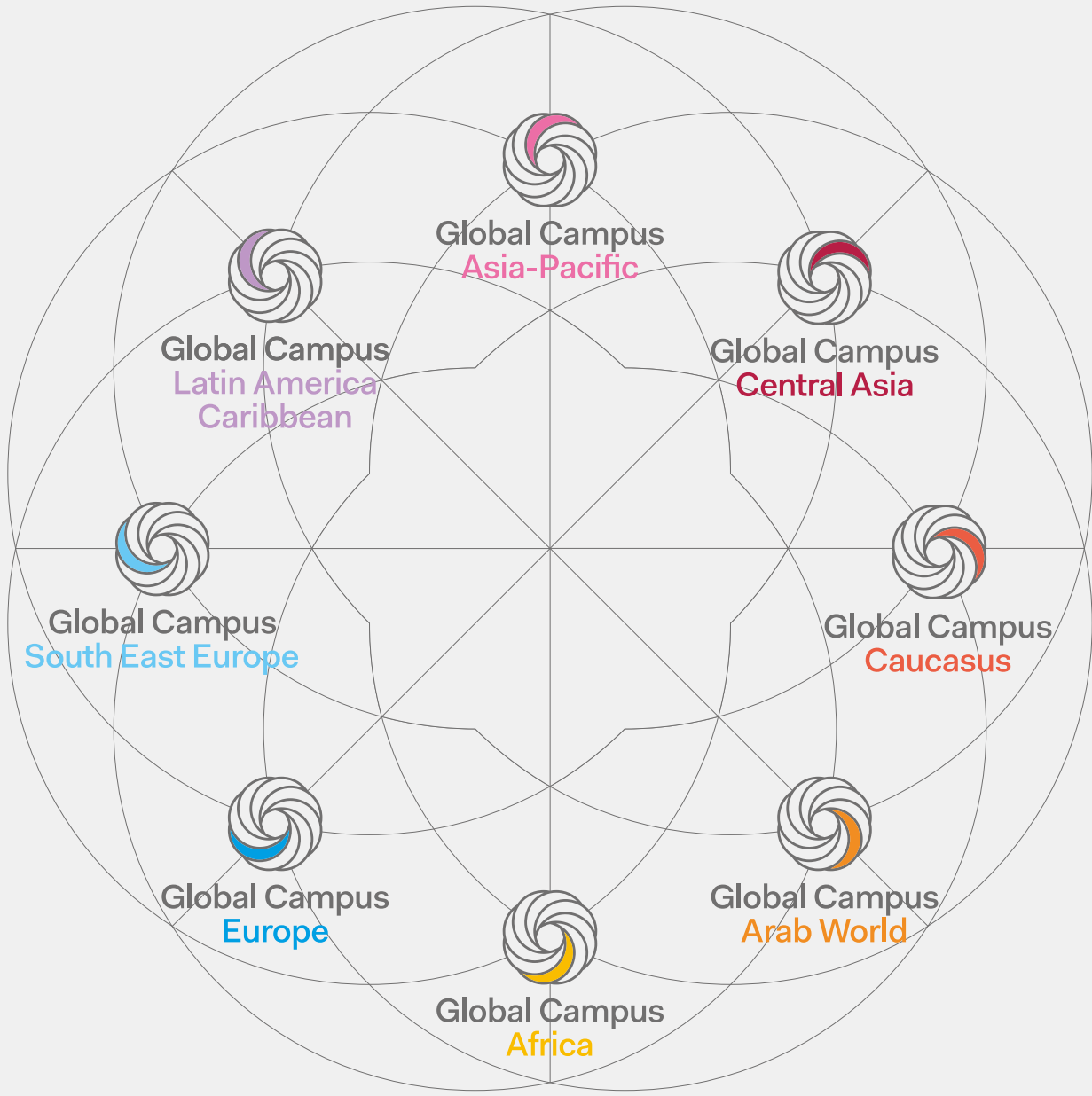




Lucía Camacho Gutiérrez

Addressing the Digital Divide among Students at Risk of School Dropout in Latin America





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Addressing the Digital Divide among Students at Risk of School Dropout in Latin America

Lucía Camacho Gutiérrez ¹

Executive summary

Digitalisation in education in Latin America (LATAM) is vital but faces challenges like high dropout rates and a significant digital divide. The region lacks thorough evaluations on how these issues impact virtual education, leaving vulnerable students at risk. Existing policies on connectivity and digital skills are superficial and not well integrated with education agendas, necessitating a more holistic approach to ensure equitable access to education through digital transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide's impact on secondary and primary school dropout rates in the LATAM public education systems. Students struggled with internet access, inadequate devices and loss of teacher contact, leading to higher dropout rates, especially among low-income and rural students. Countries like Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Honduras saw significant increases in dropout rates, although the situation was not as dire as initially feared.

Dropout rates in LATAM are influenced by multiple factors, perpetuating social and economic inequalities. The digital divide, particularly in rural areas, exacerbates educational exclusion, with gender disparities further disadvantaging girls and women. Despite efforts to improve internet access and education quality in countries like Colombia, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico, these initiatives often lack integration with strategies to reduce dropout rates.

A human rights-based approach (HRBA) to digitalisation emphasises equity, inclusion and pragmatic use of digital tools to enhance education. Public policies should focus on meaningful internet access, addressing affordability, connectivity and social environment aspects. Comprehensive data collection on the digital divide's impact on dropout rates is essential for informed policymaking. The 'My Education, Our Future' agenda promoted by different stakeholders and organisations aims to bridge the digital gap in education and support school reintegration, opening a valuable opportunity for action on this policy area.

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Introduction

LATAM countries contend with digital inequality, which divides those with internet access from those without (Gasparini & Cruces 2021; Sonia & Teddy 2022) and impacts the exercise of rights, particularly when connectivity is essential for their fulfilment.

Addressing the digital gap remains a global priority (UNGA 2015; OAS 2022), with recent efforts aimed at connecting remote and marginalised communities. However, despite government initiatives, COVID-19 underscored the impact of disconnection on human rights such as the right to education, resulting in lingering setbacks. Specifically, the digital gap in primary and secondary education heavily impacted students, caregivers and teachers who did not have physical access to digital technologies or lacked the necessary skills to make the best use of online navigation when virtual classes became the norm after educational institutions closed to curb the virus spread (Turkewitz & Rios 2021; Banco Mundial 2022).

The closure of educational institutions in the LATAM region was one of the longest in the world, making virtuality a predominant factor at many educational levels (UNICEF 2021). The challenges associated with the digital gap in accessing education were so significant that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH in Spanish/CIDH) reminded states of their duty to ensure access to digital technologies as a vital means to guarantee the right to education (CIDH 2020b). It also published a guide to assist states in ensuring universal internet access during the pandemic with a human rights perspective (CIDH 2020a; CIDH 2021).

Despite efforts to address it, school dropout remains a persistent issue in Latin America, particularly during transitions between courses and in secondary education, with only 59% of enrolled students completing compulsory education (Josephson, Francis & Jayaram 2018). Virtual learning during the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, highlighting the impact of limited internet access on education (Berniell et al. 2021).

The regional initiative ‘My Education, Our Future’ focuses on reintegrating dropout students and supporting primary and secondary school retention in Latin America and the Caribbean. It underscores the importance of closing the digital gap in education, recognising that increased digitalisation can influence future dropout rates, particularly for students with limited internet access (Banco Mundial et al. 2022; Diálogo Interamericano 2022).

Initiated by the World Bank, the Dialogue for the Americas, UNICEF and UNESCO, the initiative gained traction in 2022 with subscriptions from **Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Honduras**. However, the remaining 28 states in the region have not yet joined or endorsed it, and neither the promoters nor the four adhering states have proposed specific, measurable actions. Despite this, the initiative’s continued enrichment and broader adoption by LATAM states hold promise for two reasons: first, its endorsement by influential global and regional actors spanning diverse areas like development and technology may mitigate states’ reluctance to join; second, the agenda intersects key public policy priorities, including the right to education promotion, state digital transformation and economic development through digitalised education.

Problem description

Digitalisation in education in LATAM persists as a key agenda, necessitating a nuanced approach to address long standing issues like dropout rates intertwined with the digital divide. Bridging these gaps is essential for effective policy making in the region’s digital transformation journey. Addressing school dropout rates and digital inequality is urgent but unexplored in the region. No country has thoroughly assessed

the digital divide’s impact on virtual education, exacerbating the risk of dropout among already vulnerable students.

Multiple factors contribute to the lack of evidence linking school dropout rates and the digital divide. Public policies on connectivity in LATAM superficially intersect with education agendas, focusing mainly on digital device skills. Data on the digital divide

in schools often relies on proxies like internet access at home, student learning levels and teacher perceptions, potentially misrepresenting the complex issue (Rieble-Aubourg & Viteri 2020).

Education policies focusing on digital technology implementation often overlook the intersection of the digital divide with the right to education and school dropout. Despite the availability of digital resources in education systems, few LATAM countries have comprehensive national strategies leveraging ICTs for education purposes. This lack of integration between education and digital divide concerns highlights a critical gap in public policies, underscoring the need for a **more holistic approach** to address these intertwined challenges and ensure equitable access to education for all students (UNESCO 2021).

The lack of dialogue between connectivity, digitalisation and traditional education agendas surfaced during the pandemic, evident in cases of students dropping out due to internet and device access issues. Instances of lost teacher-student contact due to physical classroom limitations further highlighted these challenges (Ayuso 2020b; González 2020; Página12 2020; Cortés 2021; Redacción Perú21 2023). In LATAM countries, the number of students who resumed studies post-pandemic remains unknown, with a lack of holistic policies to address dropout implications. Estimates suggest alarming consequences without comprehensive action.

In 2020, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) experts projected that LATAM's primary and secondary education dropout rates would rise due to the pandemic, worsening short-term inequality. **Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Honduras** were expected to experience increases, with rates ranging from 2.8% to 23%. IDB experts suggest that the absence of peer interaction, segregated students, declining virtual learning quality and inadequate teacher support could worsen dropout rates, notably during critical educational transitions. This impact is expected to disproportionately affect vulnerable lower and middle-class students (Acevedo et al. 2020).

The 2022 IDB report suggested that dropout rates during the pandemic's first year might not have been as severe as anticipated, but remain historically high. However, experts cautioned that neglecting pandemic-induced educational backlogs could lead to a continued rise in dropout rates, particularly impacting students from low-income households, those affected by caregiver income loss or rural students facing disconnection. They warned that without intervention, dropout rates could worsen in 2021 and beyond (Acevedo et al. 2022).

School dropout, a multi-causal issue, leads to educational exclusion and perpetuates social and economic inequality in LATAM. Those who don't complete secondary education often face lower incomes, struggle to secure stable employment and are at higher risk of substance abuse or criminal involvement (Busso, Bassi & Muñoz 2013; Adelman & Székely 2016; Kattan & Székely 2017; Josephson, Francis & Jayaram 2018; Romero Sánchez & Hernández Pedreño 2019).

Moreover, school dropout is a macroeconomic problem for LATAM countries whose growth contracted during and after the pandemic was over, and which are still recovering from it (Latif, Choudhary & Hammayan 2015; Mussida, Sciulli & Signorelli 2019). This scenario would have cascading effects on productivity, employability, an increase in poverty and a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable populations in the long term (Banco Mundial 2021).

As if this was not enough, the **digital divide in education** could reinforce exclusionary factors in the exercise of the right to education. For example, students living in rural areas are less likely to complete their secondary education (UN 2003; López, Pereyra & Sourrouille 2007; Guzmán, Barragán & Cala Viteri 2021) and rural areas have the most pronounced digital divide, with less than 43.3% of the population in these areas having significant internet access. In other words, there are at least 72 million people in LATAM living in rural areas with no access to any form of internet (mobile or at home) (Ziegler & Arias Segura 2022).

Rieble-Aubourg and Viteri highlight that only two-thirds of LATAM secondary schools lack broadband internet for online learning, with less than 20% of vulnerable schools having it. They note inequalities in teachers' digital literacy, influenced by school type and socio-economic context (2020).

Gender exacerbates inequity in LATAM, particularly for girls and women in the poorest segments, often left behind in bridging the digital gap. They face lower rates of educational reintegration, especially pronounced in rural areas with prevailing patriarchal norms. In these settings, tight finances often prioritise boys' education, perpetuating gender disparities (Tarín et al. 2022; Subrahmanyam 2016).

Women lag in education and digital inclusion due to factors like caregiving and domestic duties, exacerbated during the pandemic, hindering their academic and career pursuits (Subrahmanyam 2016; Borgonovi et al. 2018; April et al. 2020). Fragility,

conflict and violence in low-income countries worsen this, with girls facing higher risks of dropout than boys; despite similar enrolment rates, violence both in and out of schools disproportionately affects girls, particularly in conflict-affected regions (World Bank n.d.).

Plan International (2021) figures indicated that ‘19% of girls worldwide believe that COVID-19 will force them to temporarily put their education on hold, while 7% fear they will have to drop out of school entirely’. In parallel, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2021) declared that ‘[e]stimates show that 11 million girls may not go back to class due to COVID-related education disruptions. They would join the 130 million worldwide who were already out of school before the pandemic’.

Early pregnancy contributes to school dropout among women in LATAM, affecting their future prospects, including digital literacy and employment (Suárez 2018; Josephson, Francis & Jayaram 2018; Borgonovi et al. 2018). It diminishes educational opportunities, leading to financial dependence on partners or families and limiting access to digital technologies like smartphones with internet connectivity (April et al. 2020).

This scenario is concerning not only in countries within LATAM but also in the most developed economies. In 2021, the Group of Seven issued a

declaration which pointed out as global set-backs in girls’ education the ‘dropping out because they [girls] may be caring for others, forced into child marriage, subjected to female genital mutilation at higher rates, or exposed to increased gender-based violence; [also] girls who face conflict, displacement, and natural disasters have least access to school as a place of safety and protection’ (G7 2021).

Girls and women face challenges in reintegration due to limited affordability of devices, time constraints and gender-based violence, perpetuating the digital gender gap (Tyers-Chowdhury & Binder 2021; UN Women & WHO 2023). This creates a ‘Digital Divide Paradox’, where those most in need of digital technologies are least likely to access them (WEF 2022).

The **absence of data** on the digital divide’s impact on school dropout rates is concerning, given the potential obstacles students face, including lack of devices for academic support, connectivity issues and exposure to online violence (World Bank 2021). These challenges can hamper government efforts to reintegrate and retain students amidst the pandemic-induced educational crisis.

Rationale for action

Public policy actions in most LATAM states are aimed at closing the digital divide and reducing school dropout rates. However, these efforts, along with encouraging the reintegration of primary and high school students who left their compulsory education, have followed separate paths. Additionally, they have not adopted a sustained HRBA.

Countries such as **Colombia, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador** and **Mexico** outline in their digital transformation agendas progress towards closing the digital divide as a means to achieve, among others, the digitalisation of public services, including the service to public education and the transformation of national economies so they can be data-based (CEDN 2021; Presidencia del Consejo de Ministros 2021; Gobierno de Chile 2022; MCTI 2022; MINTEL 2022; MINTIC 2022).

Efforts to enhance education through digitalisation are evident in national agendas aimed to broaden internet access and improve quality using technology. However, these agendas often overlook the crucial intersection with addressing persistent issues such as school dropout rates. Meanwhile, countries like **Chile, Peru, Brazil** and **Argentina** have prioritised measures such as Early Warning Systems (EWS) to prevent dropout, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (MINEDUC 2019; MINEDU 2020; UNESCO 2021; Ministério da Educação 2022; World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO 2022).

Notably, an EWS is crucial for schools to identify and support students with specific needs promptly (UNICEF 2017). Traditionally, red flags included academic struggles, behaviour issues and chronic absenteeism. However, the pandemic entailed adaptations to accommodate virtual learning realities.

For instance, measuring student engagement involves factors like communication gaps with teachers, absence from school activities and connectivity issues during remote classes (UNESCO 2021). The pandemic prompted a shift in EWS towards evaluating the digital divide's impact on student engagement in education. However, LATAM countries have not yet implemented measurements using these new indicators (UNESCO 2021). Persistent challenges in data collection, compounded by data protection and privacy concerns in EWS implementation, risk perpetuating stereotypes against certain student groups.²

Perusia and Cardini (2021) highlighted **Argentina's** imperative to bolster EWS by merging data from the education sector with ICT to gauge school dropout risk more effectively. They urged Argentina to expedite the creation of robust educational management information systems at national and jurisdictional levels, emphasising the need for individualised and digitised student records. Moreover, they underscored the necessity of implementing a sturdy data protection framework and devising tactics to integrate data from non-educational sectors into these systems.

In Argentina, provinces like Mendoza and Entre Ríos have automated their EWS to measure and predict school dropout risk, despite known risks of automation and prediction failures due to incomplete data representation (Dillon 2023). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education in Buenos Aires was ordered in 2022 to release updated school dropout statistics during the pandemic, addressing concerns about transparency hindering civil society organisations' assessment of policies and the digital divide's impact (ACIJ 2022).

Some LATAM countries employ strategies to mitigate school dropout risk, such as providing economic aid to families in **Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Honduras and Brazil** (World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO 2022). Additionally, school feeding programmes have been introduced to support student retention, albeit these measures are not directly linked to educational digitalisation. Although these programmes may not directly affect digitalisation efforts, their indirect influence is notable, ensuring students have sustenance for active participation in digital learning opportunities.

Furthermore, in countries such as **Colombia, Argentina, Peru and Chile**, national agendas addressing the digital divide intersect with policies for primary and secondary education, primarily focusing on providing tablets or digital devices to schools. However, this approach lacks a holistic view

of the digital divide, especially evident during the pandemic where these policies intensified but proved insufficient in addressing the complexities of student engagement in education.

For instance, in Buenos Aires, a civil society organisation initiated legal action in 2020 to compel the city to provide digital devices to vulnerable public school students for online learning due to COVID-19 (ACIJ 2020). The lawsuit aimed to enforce the goals of the 'Plan Sarmiento' policy, which since 2011 has aimed to enhance education quality and equal opportunities by annually distributing free tablets and netbooks with internet access to students (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires n.d.). Nonetheless, many students lacked access to digital devices during the pandemic, prompting judicial intervention to ensure device provision and emphasise internet access as a fundamental right, particularly for vulnerable and rural students (ACIJ 2020).

In 2022 **Argentina** introduced the 'Plan Connecting Equality' aimed at equipping state-run public schools with technological resources to enhance teaching and learning processes (Poder Ejecutivo Nacional 2022). However, the plan fell short of its target, with only 610,000 devices distributed instead of the intended 1.5 million, leaving many students without internet access (ACIJ 2023). Following the end of the pandemic, students who received laptops through initiatives like 'Sarmiento' and 'Connecting Equality' were asked to return them to schools. Yet, reports surfaced of widespread theft of these devices, which are then sold on the black market (Infobae 2022; 2023; El Litoral 2023; La Nación 2024; Página12 2024).

This case illustrates the challenges faced by well-intentioned public policies, a situation mirrored in other countries across the region. In **Peru**, despite the government's commitment to provide digital devices to public schools, reports revealed widespread issues such as devices not functioning due to lack of internet access or outdated systems (El Peruano 2022; Arce 2023; Gestión.pe 2023). Similarly, in Bogotá, **Colombia**, the mayor's initiative to distribute tablets with internet access to students went unfulfilled, with not a single tablet delivered by the time students returned to school (Semana 2021).

² This scenario has been documented in the EWS implemented in Wisconsin (U.S.) where the use of gender and income data to measure dropout of school was predicting and labelling more frequently black students as in 'high risk' in comparison with their white fellows, reinforcing racial stereotypes against them (Feathers et al. 2023).

The intersection of the digital divide and education agendas also regards education technologies (EdTech) encompassing a wide array of digital and connected tools utilised to facilitate or enhance education during disruptions, as defined by West (2023). The deployment of EdTech in primary and secondary education, though still nascent compared to higher education, expanded significantly during the pandemic to enhance access, pedagogical capacities of teachers and academic information management (IDB 2021). However, a UNESCO study on EdTech's effectiveness during the pandemic in **Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Uruguay** revealed its limitations and highlighted how the digital divide hampers broader student inclusion as well as the fragmented and uncoordinated integration of digital technologies into educational systems, indicating persistent gaps in public policies (Valeria & Ángeles 2022).

Another report on EdTech in LATAM, which prioritises a more corporatist view on the growth and deployment of EdTech companies in the region, reveals that, among 130 surveyed individuals working in educational settings, there is a majority desire for the widespread use of EdTech in primary and secondary education to increase people's participation in school, but this goal is practically limited by 'low levels of maturity in institutions and great resistance to change' (IDB 2021: 9).

In 2022, UNESCO's report titled 'An Ed-Tech tragedy?' intensely criticised the lack of evidence supporting the purported benefits of digital technologies in education and cautioned against intensified surveillance practices, disproportionate benefits for large corporations and the potential impoverishment of educational processes when digital technologies overshadow traditional pedagogical methods (West 2023). Additionally, it accused the deployment of digital technologies in vulnerable contexts of exacerbating pre-existing educational inequalities, particularly impacting students on the disadvantaged side of the digital divide. However, some critics argue that the report overlooks the positive impact of technology, such as enhancing softer skills, and emphasises that technology alone cannot address structural inequalities (Viner 2023).

In the debate over EdTech's role in education, balancing related integration remains pivotal, particularly concerning its impact on school dropout rates. A holistic approach, as advocated in the IDB report 'What technology can and can't do for education', underscores the importance of digitalising education while upholding principles of access, equity and inclusion, without overreliance on technology (Díaz et al. 2020). This approach emphasises enhancing stakeholders' capabilities and fostering collaboration, with a HRBA guiding coordination efforts.

The need for a HRBA for public policies on digital divide and school dropouts

The integration of public policies addressing both digital education and traditional challenges like school dropout rates necessitates a holistic approach guided by a HRBA. This approach relies on the international human rights normative framework which underscores the importance of inclusion and equity in bridging the digital divide and ensuring access to education for all.

Regarding the digital divide and internet access, the aforementioned international framework establishes a standard whereby the internet serves as a means for exercising other rights, and actions aimed at closing the digital divide are necessary to ensure that internet access is not limited to only the economic elites in countries with low internet penetration. Similarly, internet access should be meaningful, relevant and useful to the differentiated needs of the population groups that can make use of this technology (Special Rapporteur Frank La Rue 2011: para 61).

The HRBA emphasises closing the gender gap in the digital divide through principles of equality, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, alongside transparency, accountability, empowerment and sustainability. Decision-making should reflect the various gender stereotypes experienced by women and girls versus boys and men in primary and secondary education (OHCHR 2017).

Efforts to bridge the digital gap in education must align with the broader objective of providing accessible, free and high-quality education. Rather than solely focusing on integrating cutting-edge digital technologies, policies should prioritise the pragmatic use of digital tools that improve educational accessibility, affordability and adaptability. Importantly, digital technologies alone cannot address complex educational challenges like dropout rates; instead, comprehensive and systemic measures are necessary alongside their implementation under the '4As' framework developed for the right to education (Special Rapporteur Koumbou Boly Barry 2022: paras 6, 22-34).

Closing the educational digital gap under the HRBA emphasises equity³ and inclusion to ensure universal access and benefit from digital tools, particularly for vulnerable students at risk of dropout, with a focus on adapting to the needs of returning students. In aligning with the HRBA, policies should consider the diversity and capacities of students, preserve values and human interaction in education and adopt a fully

inclusive approach to leave no one behind (Naciones Unidas & CEPAL 2018; Special Rapporteur Kishore Singh 2016: paras 62-70).

Moreover, efforts to close the digital gap in primary and secondary education must avoid excessive surveillance or data collection from students (Special Rapporteur Koumbou Boly Barry 2022: paras 47-49). Sensitivity should also be shown towards the potential negative effects of unsupervised digital device use on student mental health (Special Rapporteur Koumbou Boly Barry 2022: paras 87-93), in order to ensure the promotion of a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.

³ This approach is in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNGA 2015).

Policy options

Option 1: Integrate efforts to close the digital divide with policies addressing school dropout

A holistic vision of the digital divide impacts the scope of public policies aimed at its closure. For example, the concept of 'meaningful internet access' has been seen as encompassing three key pillars: affordability, meaningful connectivity and an encouraging social environment, beyond the material access to infrastructure and devices — which is relevant but should not be exclusive (Jorge & Woodhouse 2022).

First, **affordability** remains a significant barrier to internet access in Latin America, with families in **Peru, Chile and Brazil** who pay over \$20 per month (Galperín 2012; Galperín 2013; Woodhouse 2019). In Central American countries like **Panama, Costa Rica or Guatemala**, the average monthly cost exceeds \$40, exacerbated by limited service provider options. For economically challenged families, the prohibitive cost of home internet access underscores the importance of bridging the digital divide in schools as a means of providing affordable internet access for underserved populations.

Second, **meaningful connectivity** encompasses multiple facets, including browsing speed, device ownership and daily usage focused on educational and informational content. Recent studies on **Brazil, Chile and Colombia** highlight a trend where internet usage among younger demographics prioritises social media over educational content (Global Digital Insights 2021; Masías & Alba 2021; Agencia Branch 2022; DANE 2023). Furthermore, internet speed diminishes in rural and remote areas, constraining access to diverse online content.

Studies across various LATAM countries highlight a gender gap in digital device ownership, particularly disadvantaging women in rural areas, contributing to lower digital skill development influenced by factors like violence and caregiving duties (Borgonovi et al. 2018; Otero et al. 2020; ECLAC 2023; Jeffrie 2023). Addressing this digital gender divide in schools can bolster economic development, empower women, promote gender equality, enhance educational quality and foster innovation (ECLAC 2023; Plan International n.d.). Moreover, motivation in using digital technologies can impact efforts to retain students in primary or secondary education and enhance educational engagement by encouraging active participation.

Third, an **encouraging social environment** is necessary for the closure of the digital divide to impact the socio-economic determinants of education. Teachers and caregivers play an essential role in guiding and accompanying children and adolescents in the responsible use of digital devices, as well as raising awareness about their benefits and risks.

However, current actions aimed at closing the digital divide face various challenges, including the geographical reality of several LATAM countries which hinders connecting rural or more distant educational communities from urban centres, as well as the dissatisfaction of other basic needs that condition internet access, such as intermittent or deficient electrical service (CEPAL 2023).

Community networks offer cost-effective alternatives for connecting remote areas, fostering democratic participation and community ownership (Belli et al. 2019: 9). Schools can spearhead the development of these networks, but supportive legal frameworks and funding sources are crucial to their success.

Option 2: Implement statistical measurements on the pandemic's impact on digital divide-related dropout which will be critical for the future

Local policy planning requires a thorough understanding of social phenomena to inform decision-making effectively. However, in LATAM states, the intersection between diagnoses made in school reintegration and digital divide closure actions is often lacking (Acevedo et al. 2022; Herrero et al. 2022). This disconnect may lead to an incomplete understanding of primary and secondary school students' realities and the factors influencing school dropout, as well as the reciprocal impact of the digital divide on this phenomenon.

There is an urgent need for comprehensive, systematic and comparative measurements that consider urban and rural areas, as well as educational transitions. Currently, the region lacks full statistical measurements of post-pandemic school dropout rates. Similarly, metrics for the digital divide often overlook key aspects such as meaningful internet access and digital literacy experiences in schools (Acevedo et al. 2022; Herrero et al. 2022).

Accurate statistical information is essential for informed policy making. Collecting data is important to address inequality issues, breakdowns based on vulnerable conditions such as age, education and poverty are needed and states must provide

clear justifications for data collection, specifying its intended purpose to ensure transparency and effectiveness in policy development (CIDH 2008: 24; CIDH 2021: 224).

Option 3: Strengthen the 'My Education, Our Future' agenda through participation by more countries and their financial support

The cited 'My Education, Our Future' agenda, which would connect the two key public policy priorities aimed at closing the digital gap in education and strengthening school reintegration and retention after COVID-19, has been endorsed by 5 out of 33 LATAM states. Thus, less than 10% of them seem interested in a shared agenda focused on the recovery of the education sector through digital technologies.

The regional context may indeed delay or affect the impact of increased adherence to the agenda, partly due to the progressive weakening of democracies in various countries (such as **Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru**) as well as the erosion of regional integration processes. **Argentina**, which is a leader in universal, free and quality public education, is considering disaffiliating from organisations such as MERCOSUR (Mercado Común del Sur in Spanish) and UNASUR (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas in Spanish) (Bae Negocios 2023), under the understanding that international cooperation poses an obstacle or interference in local affairs.

The disengagement of **Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba** from the Organization of American States further complicates the situation (BBC News Mundo 2021). This organisation previously brought together the largest number of countries in pursuing a common agenda related to the promotion, protection and guarantee of human rights in the region. The withdrawal may hinder the coordination and collaboration needed to address shared challenges, including those related to education and the digital divide.

Addressing educational and technological lag holds crucial economic implications for countries, impacting their gross domestic product (GDP). Boosting GDP serves as a powerful incentive for endorsing the ‘My Education, Our Future’ agenda, as investment in education and digital inclusion fosters human capital development, driving economic growth by nurturing a skilled workforce and enhancing

productivity, innovation and competitiveness. Framing the agenda as a strategic investment in human capital and economic development may persuade countries to prioritise education and digital inclusion despite political differences, fostering regional cooperation and collaboration on shared goals related to education and technology.

Policy recommendations

For LATAM states:

- Adopt and advocate for the ‘My Education, Our Future’ agenda to boost future economic productivity through digital technology integration in education systems.
- Encourage states without statistical measurements on the digital divide’s impact on dropout rates to develop post-pandemic indicators, including disaggregated data and assessments of digital access, usage, literacy and appropriation among students.
- Expand focus on broader socio-economic determinants in digital divide policies for schools, mandating tailored local plans, integrating digital skills into the curriculum and offering support for women and girls facing educational barriers.
- Implement legislative frameworks prioritising internet access for all schools, particularly in rural areas, and establish comprehensive evaluation mechanisms to assess policy effectiveness in closing the digital divide and combating school dropout.

For caregivers, teachers and educational institutions:

- Foster collaborative literacy among caregivers and teachers to educate students about digital technology’s risks and benefits, emphasising coordinated efforts.
- Provide caregivers with timely socio-economic information to schools to address potential dropout risks in primary and secondary education, while urging teachers and institutions to maintain and enhance early warning mechanisms and support services for at-risk students.

For civil society:

- Monitor the implementation of policies to close the digital divide and reduce dropout rates by reporting and raising awareness about defective implementation, corruption and persistent shortcomings.
- Advocate for policy continuity across government transitions and conduct research on the long-term effects of closing the digital divide on education systems to inform improvements and future enhancements.

For international institutions:

- Promote comprehensive data collection by LATAM states on digital inequality and school dropout rates, disaggregated to inform targeted interventions.
- Advocate for policy integration of digital inclusion strategies within education policies, emphasising concurrent efforts to address digital inequality and school dropout rates, including adherence to the ‘My Education, Our Future’ agenda.

For the Italian authorities interested in this agenda:

- Encourage LATAM states to adhere to the ‘My Education, Our Future’ agenda in light of its positive economic impact and workforce development benefits from reducing dropout rates.
- Offer technical assistance to LATAM states for designing and implementing comprehensive public policies to address the digital divide and its impact on reducing school dropout, including assistance in developing measurement instruments and statistical surveys post-COVID-19.

Conclusion

The analysis of the digital divide and school dropout rates in LATAM underscores the urgent need to tackle educational and digital inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite digitalisation being a shared priority, there is a disconnect between policies targeting the digital divide and those addressing dropout rates. The lack of clear evidence and comprehensive statistics on the digital divide's impact hampers policy making efforts. Limited progress has been made in developing holistic strategies to bridge these disparities, resulting in missed opportunities to mitigate the negative effects on educational outcomes.

The macroeconomic repercussions of school dropout extend far beyond individual students, impacting regional economic growth, perpetuating social inequality and fostering long-term poverty. Moreover, the digital divide amplifies exclusionary factors, particularly affecting marginalised groups like rural students and economically disadvantaged girls and women. Without concerted efforts to address these intertwined issues, the region risks widening educational disparities and impeding

socio-economic progress. Current strategies to bridge the digital divide, as exemplified in Argentina, Peru and Colombia, often fall short by focusing solely on providing digital devices without ensuring broader internet access and robust technological infrastructure, underscoring the necessity for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to digitalisation in education.

A HRBA guides policies to close the digital divide and reduce school dropout rates by prioritising equality, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion for all students. Implementing this approach faces challenges in data privacy, equity and inclusion. Addressing the intersection of the digital divide and school dropout rates demands a holistic approach grounded in human rights standards and principles, considering diverse student needs in LATAM. Bridging policy agendas with practical implementation remains crucial. Prioritising equity and inclusion in education systems empowers all students for success in the digital era.

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