

IS EDUCATION A RIGHT OR A SERVICE IN COLOMBIA?

A system for the reproduction of social inequalities

*¿Es la educación un derecho o un servicio en Colombia? Un sistema de
reproducción de las desigualdades sociales*

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Resumen

La educación sigue siendo un importante instrumento de política pública y un mecanismo cultural. Sin embargo, dependiendo de diferentes condiciones, puede ser un escenario de exclusión constante en la sociedad o el promotor del desarrollo social, la innovación, la ciencia y la tecnología. La pregunta de partida de este artículo de reflexión busca saber cómo se aborda la educación: ¿es un derecho o un servicio que reproduce las desigualdades sociales en Colombia? Para responder a esto, este documento se divide en cuatro partes. El primero es una breve introducción que contextualiza el problema identificado. El segundo presenta las causas que originan el sistema de reproducción de las desigualdades sociales en el sistema educativo a partir de dos hipótesis planteadas por García Villegas y Gómez-Estrada. Estos son: i) el enfrentamiento entre partidos liberales y conservadores que condiciona la relación Estado-Iglesia a la hora de implementar un modelo educativo; y ii) la continua tensión entre gobiernos, sindicatos de docentes y universitarios que defienden ideas políticas de izquierda. La tercera parte contiene un análisis descriptivo sobre la segregación en calidad y clase del sistema educativo nacional, que comprende la educación inicial, la educación primaria (primaria), la educación media y media superior (secundaria y bachillerato), y la educación postsecundaria. -educación secundaria o terciaria (enseñanza superior). Finalmente, se realizan las conclusiones y consideraciones finales.

Abstract

Education is still an important instrument of public policy and a cultural mechanism. However, depending on different conditions, it can be a scenario for constant exclusion in society or the promoter of social development, innovation, science, and technology. The starting question of this reflection article seeks to know how education is approached: is it a right or a service that reproduces social inequalities in Colombia? To answer this, this paper is divided into four parts. The first is a brief introduction contextualizing the identified problem. The second one presents the causes that originate the system for the reproduction of social inequalities in the education system based on two hypotheses raised by García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada. These are: i) the

confrontation between liberal and conservative parties that conditions the State-Church relationship when implementing an educational model; and ii) the continuous tension between governments, teachers' unions and university students who defend leftist political ideas. The third part contains a descriptive analysis on segregation in terms of quality and class of the national education system, which comprises early childhood education, primary education (elementary school), lower secondary and upper secondary education (middle school and high school), and post-secondary or tertiary education (higher education). Finally, conclusions and final considerations are made.

Palabras Clave: Educación; derecho; desigualdad social; mecanismo cultural, servicio público.

Keywords: Education; right; social inequality; cultural mechanism, public service.

“Tearing down public education would mean destroying illusions; it is the cost they are paying for keeping that illusion. A large part of public education is what it costs the bourgeoisie to maintain the illusion of most of the population that their fate is not determined by their birth, but is due to or results from the proper use and utilization of the opportunities provided by the system through education.”

Estanislao Zuleta

[Quote translated from its original in Spanish]

1. Introduction

The book *La Quinta Puerta*, edited by García-Villegas, Cárdenas, and Fergusson (2021); begins with the premise, “four places are available to those who have no money: the hospital, the jail, the church, and the cemetery.” This statement became part of a *bolero* (a Spanish music genre and dance) by the anguished lament of Daniel Santos and is now the phrase that motivates this reflection article focused on education. Education is understood as the culturally constructed space for developing and transmitting socially accepted civic

knowledge and values. However, it has not significantly been the scenario for social transformation in several latitudes, especially in Colombia, where such knowledge and values should contribute to a better fate for its people. On the contrary, it has become a mechanism for reproducing deep socioeconomic inequalities in the country. Thus creating cultural codes that feed exclusion in this distressing careerism that characterizes the social class in Colombia, turning into a supply and demand service according to the user.

From this perspective, although education continues to be the main public policy instrument and cultural mechanism to improve people's social conditions, it does not provide any alternative place to avoid the fate lamented by Daniel Santos in his *bolero*. Education in Colombia reproduces a social class phenomenon that, for reasons reviewed in this article, causes a kind of social segregation expressed through the lack of intergenerational social mobility, the cultural capital, consumption types, and cultural codes reproduced in the education system. This has generated a loop, that is, educational traps that prevent bridging socioeconomic gaps and harmonizing cultural differences. Moreover, such traps increase this social differentiation when it comes to capital accumulation.

Social segregation reproduced by the national education system has worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic, thus enhancing the capacity of this system to propagate social inequalities. Overall, segregation can be explained by multiple causes, including: 1) the differences related to infrastructure and endowments for the public and private education systems; 2) the quality of education based both on teacher qualifications and on the competencies and contextual conditions developed by students from public and private institutions; 3) the gap in dropout rates in both systems; 4) the status and social connections built depending on whether one belongs to the public or private system. This indicates that a structural part of the segregation generated by the Colombian education system comes from the lack of a model that harmonizes the public and private education systems, which should coexist as a requirement for social choice. However, such choices should not be conditioned by the apparent gaps in quality and social class between the two systems; and finally, 5) the social valuation of the educational performance in both systems.

As García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada (2021) state, “public education in Colombia is strongly biased by social class.” This has created an education system with higher participation from private education throughout the levels of education. While in most socioeconomically developed countries, the State is responsible for a large part of the educational programs at the early childhood, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education levels, in Colombia, there has been a growing dynamic of increasing private educational programs. This dynamic has led to a selection process based on the belonging to a social class. “The children of rich people tend to study in exclusive high-quality schools while children from poor families study in public or private schools of average or poor quality” (Cárdenas, Fergusson and García Villegas (2021); not to mention greater gaps when analyzing indigenous, black and peasant communities.

Colombia has not been able to build a public notion of education because, from its origins as a Republic, education has served as an instrument for domination. Hence, the social tensions to define the education system, which the Church and powerful political groups have controlled. These institutions have prioritized the formation of values from education, such values mainly close to the regime of political power, instead of prioritizing the formation of quality and relevant knowledge with the country’s productive and social capacity. In short, education in Colombia has been more of a mechanism for power than a true alternative for social mobility.

In social terms, power is exercised through the control of bodies since such control makes it possible to enforce an ideal, a government, or a social relation. However, in modernity, power is no longer limited to the direct subjugation of bodies, as value can be created through intentional action, whether in the form of a consumer, a worker, an owner of capital, or a citizen. Consequently, education has become part of the main means of domination today and has also been enhanced by social control instruments arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, which will be analyzed later in this paper.

2. The Root of Things

In the last decades, there has been a growing trend worldwide called by different authors the *elite education* (2018) mainly associated with private education. However, in highly socially and economically developed countries, this system coexists with massive and good quality public education, mainly at the elementary level, even in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. This coexistence of public and private models with high-quality education represents democratic societies and guarantors of equal opportunities. Unfortunately, this dynamic has not been present in Colombia, where wide gaps in quality and status between public and private systems have led to social segregation based on whether one belongs to the public or private education system.

In literature, there are arguments supporting different hypotheses as to why the Colombian education system has evolved that way, especially regarding the limited capacity to create opportunities regardless of social class or social and territory context. Nevertheless, the starting point for this reflection comprises the hypotheses proposed by García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada (2021), which are based on a series of political-religious tensions that prevented the consolidation of a state educational project that would be a source of opportunities for society. These tensions included: (i) the confrontation between liberal and conservative parties that conditioned the State-Church relationship when implementing an educational model; and (ii) the continuous tension between governments, teachers' unions and university students who defended leftist political ideas.

The country's establishment as an independent Republic brought about a series of contradictions and lags from the colony regarding the consolidation of administrative bodies that would be able to channel the new freedom and self-determination paradigms of the people. Although, at the time, there was a need for a change in the institutions and rules associated with political power, this consensus did not include the need for a change in social values, mainly linked to the Catholic religion, which would enable the consolidation of a secular, liberal and democratic state. The country burst into self-determination as a Republic, but unfortunately, with social and religious values from the previous regime. Certainly, the Creole elites, which constituted the first administrative

bodies of the State, gave total power to the Church to continue being the provider of social and religious values, mainly from education, as happened in the Colony.

In this regard, García and Gómez (2021) state that: “The defenders of tradition did not want their children and new generations to be educated with values other than religious ones, as these were for them the very foundation of the social order.” This is very interesting because the country’s independence led to a regime of substitution of powers, but not to a substitution of the social and moral values required to consolidate a secular, liberal and democratic State. In the end, that independence was purely a substitution of control by Creole powers, with no solid social base that would transform their welfare and liberties.

In Groot (1953), since colonial times, the Church was in control of primary, secondary (lower and upper) and post-secondary (higher) education in most of the country and was so until the early twentieth century, when the “Revolution on the March” (Revolución en Marcha) by Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934 – 1938) (2004), produced a transformation of the national education system. This gave rise to a new tension, the central root of the second hypothesis, which will be reviewed below.

One of the main factors of the tension created by the Church-State relationship was the management of the education system. Such tension was not based on a system of religious beliefs, but on the need of certain opponents of political powers of the time to separate the State from the moral principles of the Church. Clearly, this was reflected in the political constitution of the time [0]. This dispute reached political parties of the time; on the one hand, radical members of the conservative party perceived the Church’s loss of power, mainly concerning the administration of the education system, as a loss of the moral and social order of the Republic. On the other hand, the Liberal Party and some moderate conservatives expressed the need for the State to assume a major role in educating the population based on secular social values.

The purpose of this reflection is not to go into the historical details that support this hypothesis, but to analyze the implications of this Church-State tension to

this day, which has made it impossible to consolidate an educational project that creates opportunities. It is true that the moral and political tensions regarding the secular nature of the education system reached up to the National Front (Frente Nacional) (2021). At that moment, through time and according to the ideological nuance of the government in power, there were changes in the correlation of forces and thus in the administration of the State. Even so, radical conservatives managed to impose their vision of the education system. It is worth mentioning that, due to the contradictions mentioned above during the independence process, education in Colombia was never conceived as a universal system. Instead, it was thought by the political elites, for the formation of the generational circle related to the power groups. This gave legitimacy to passing political and governmental power from generation to generation, which was associated with the same class circle.

The purpose of education was the formation of moral values (morals from Catholic principles), which allowed for social order and absolute respect for institutional political powers, in addition to developing knowledge associated with the basic trades of daily life. (García and Gómez, 2021)

“The relative secularization of Colombian society in the second half of the 20th century is more attributable to the modernizing effects of the market, globalization, urbanization and the fatigue of the civil wars than to the victory of the liberal project. Only when society became more secular and pluralistic due to the new times, did conservatism and the Church lose much of their power and the balance of power between the two parties became more equal.” (pp. 40 – 41)
[Quote translated from its original in Spanish]

While the Church-State relationship tension has lost hegemony, its consequences persist. For example, it gave a kind of status and social distinction to the education system, dividing the formative nature of the system according to social classes. In addition, the formative purpose of moral values associated with the government in power was imposed rather than the formation of knowledge for the entire population in connection with the country's productive and social structure. The origins of distinction and segregation in the education system came from the Republic's first century, and although the narrative and the actors have changed, the elitist spirit in the national educational model is still present.

Another series of tensions, especially of a political-ideological nature, was unleashed by the coming to power of the Liberal Party, mainly in Alfonso López Pumarejo's government (1934-1938). These tensions increased the distrust of the national political power elites towards a state and secular education system. As Silva (1989) points out, the radical liberals sought to reform the education system based on three ideological pillars: i) education as the democratic institutions' cornerstone; ii) regulating the separation of civil and ecclesiastical power in the education system; and iii) defining the teaching role of the State and how the State exercises sovereignty through the education system.

This led to the emergence of different institutions that sought to consolidate a secular and universal educational project. Among the milestones from the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries produced by the arrival of liberal governments were: the establishment of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, the Escuela Normal Superior, the Biblioteca Nacional, women's access to the education system, the primary and secondary education expansion, and other events. Of course, the Conservative Party, especially Laureano Gómez, quickly associated this liberal educational vocation with leftist and anti-Catholic ideas. As García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada (2021, p. 55) argue, "the conservatives claimed (...) that the liberal government intended to turn Colombia into a Bolshevik nation, which implied a political practice of religious persecution with the presence of Freemasonry and Satan"

Although the liberal governments of the mid-twentieth century in Colombia were clearly far from communist regimes, the influence of leftist ideologies of the time was notorious. This new tension leads to the second hypothesis proposed by García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada (2021), where the ideological dispute regarding political values promoted by the education system joined the old dispute to separate the administration of the education system from the Church. As liberals were the main promoters of the public, secular and universal education system, but were associated with communism, socialism and leftism by the Conservative party leaders, the public education system ended up being linked to the development of ideals opposed to the respect for authority and institutions. Therefore, distrust in this system by political elites increased.

This tension and distrust worsened after the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán on April 9, 1948, unleashing a popular revolt of vast social dimensions. An important part of the country's political elites associated the “barbarism” from the revolts with “erroneous educational actions developed by the liberal governments, especially during the Revolution on the March by Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934-1938)” (1989, p. 114). The Episcopal Conference of the time made one of such associations between revolts and the public education system:

“We absolutely disagree with the communist leader (Gerardo Molina – the author includes the name) appointment to head the Universidad Nacional, which holds us harmless from the deviation of the education received by our most brilliant youth in this institution, up to the point of leading the subversion of the constitutional law (orden constitucional) on April 9” (1989, p. 114). [Quote translated from its original in Spanish]

The political elites blamed education for the revolts, specifically the education provided by the public system, rather than the non-conformity of the citizens towards the regressive economic and social policies of the time. This event unleashed what some authors call *La Violencia (Violence)* (2011), which has been the root of multiple social conflicts that still affect the country today. With the arrival of the National Front, the moral issue regarding the education system ceased to be the central topic of discussion (however, it did not disappear). In contrast, the ideological issue became the origin of the new tension. The distrust of the political elites by the formation of values conducive to “popular barbarism” accentuated the lack of public education policies to expand the national education system’s coverage and quality.

The massive migration from the countryside to the city and the significant growth of the working class geographically located in urban territories, a sociodemographic characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century in Colombia, generated a strong demand for primary and secondary education in the country. Unfortunately, the governments in power did not comprehensively address this demand, thus creating the conditions for the emergence of private education. According to Helg (1989), between 1946 and 1957, private schools grew 288%, while public schools grew 112%. Particularly, low teacher qualifications and salaries, as well as inadequate educational infrastructure,

characterized the public system. This started shaping a social representation where public education was associated with low-class-based education and leftist values.

The above created the conditions for the foundation of the Colombian Federation of Teachers- FECODE (Federación Colombiana de Educadores) in 1959. This was more of a mechanism to claim their labor rights. As Helg (1989) states, the lack of social and economic incentives for teachers in the public system produced a “loss of social prestige for the profession.” Hence, the belligerent and opposed attitude from FECODE, an institution that has played a more political role, by the very nature of its creation, and the tension with the different national governments to date.

Post-secondary education, also known as higher education or university education, experienced a similar dynamic to primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education, although not at the same level of precariousness. The tension in university education focused on student movements associated with leftist ideologies. Within the student movements, a thesis argued that the Conservative and Liberal parties were the country’s political elite representation, mainly associated with the National Front. Therefore, revolutionary ideals, mainly from France, Mexico, and Cuba, started gaining strength. This social tension represented in the student movements made its members establish many of the guerrilla movements of the time, reinforcing, once again, the distrust of the hegemonic political elites in the public education system.

In fact, in the most recent Colombian constitutional history (Hurtado and Marín, 2021), at the end of the 1980s, *la séptima papeleta* (the seventh ballot) (Amaya, 2013), a student movement made up of public and private university students and professors, promoted an unprecedented citizen mobilization in the country. These people felt overwhelmed and incessantly demanded a transformation in the institutional framework and the recognition and guarantee of the rights of Colombians. Since colonial times, such rights had been taken away from them in voice and vote, keeping them excluded and with strong inequalities that would make social injustice almost eternal amidst violence and armed conflict. Citizens have had to endure such violent events while being stuck in the middle of the interests of different powerful people.

Thus, on July 4, 1991, the *Constitución Política de Colombia* (Political Constitution of Colombia) was proclaimed. This one would replace the Constitution of 1886, which had already ended. The new Political Charter recognized rights never before acknowledged and contained not only in the Constitution, but also in the hearts and minds of all those who clamored to be included and accepted.

The first paragraph of Article 67 of the Political Charter states that:

“Education is a right of the individual and a public service, whose social purpose is to enable access to knowledge, science, technology, and other goods and values of culture.” [Quote translated from its original in Spanish]

After more than 30 years of this Constitution’s enactment, this human right has still not been fully complied with, and although it is a public service with a social purpose, it has been used as a service for private and economic interests.

The Constitutional Court of Colombia (Corte Constitucional de Colombia) is a Court created in the new Constitution to ensure compliance with the fundamental rights enshrined therein, including the right to education. Despite the fact that this agency has ruled on many occasions, it has not been possible to reduce the inequality gap in terms of access, permanence, coverage and quality for all Colombian residents and foreigners in the country. This has been a challenge, as will be seen later in this article.

Although educational coverage has been expanding (see Table 1), especially in the public system, there is still no support or clear strategy to universalize quality education as a right and public service with a social purpose. Such a universality would create effective opportunities for social mobility and personal self-determination.

Table 1 Gross Coverage Rate in Post-secondary Education in Colombia

Year 2009	Year 2010	Year 2011	Year 2014	Year 2020
35.5	37.1	40.3	47.0	53.9

Source: Own elaboration, ECLAC (2016); UNESCO (2016); MEN (2016, SNIES 2020).

On the other hand, as mentioned by García Villegas and Gómez-Estrada (2021, p. 72), “many public school teachers held to their labor rights and found a source of identity and pride in the union, which made up for the lack of recognition of their profession as teachers by the State and society.” However, the political vindication of public education by students and teachers has resulted in governments using repression in a representative manner, thus creating great distrust and preventing a constructive dialogue that would allow the consolidation of a strong model of quality public education.

All these elements have produced a social stigmatization phenomenon of public education, which has caused the migration of middle, upper middle, and upper class students to the private education system. This situation has turned that system into a social class mechanism and strengthened the old image of public education as low-class-based education. As private education programs grow throughout the country and at all levels of education, so does this system’s social power. In consequence, the capacity for intervention and surveillance of these institutions by control authorities has been limited. Certainly, this has been possible under the biased interpretation of the constitutional principle of freedom of education and university autonomy.

The governments in power have lost interest in strengthening public education as they see a strategic selectivity by the State that guarantees private education to the political and economic elites. From the beginning of the Republic to this day, the distrust of these elites in building a universal, quality, and secular public education system has been present. In that sense, incentives have been promoted to turn education into a highly profitable business in the country, thus pressuring society, via social class, to migrate towards private education and therefore stigmatizing public education. All of this perversely legitimizes the absence of state investment in the public system and the consolidation of a project that bridges gaps, creates opportunities and does not widen the persistent inequality in the country in the exercise of democratizing access, permanence, coverage and quality of education.

3. Structure of Inequality in the Colombian Education System

This section presents a descriptive analysis on segregation in the national education system in terms of quality and class at all levels of education: early childhood education, primary education (elementary school), lower secondary and upper secondary education (middle school and high school), and post-secondary or tertiary education (higher education). For this purpose, different statistical sources, mainly the Fergusson and Flórez (2021) work, were consulted.

From early childhood education to secondary education: Nursery school, elementary school, middle school, and high school

For some decades now, early childhood education (nursery school) has become a key to future school and personal performance. This is mainly due to the multiple interdisciplinary works that support the significance of nutrition and learning from the first years of life. However, in Colombia, it has not been possible to integrate early childhood education into the public education system, as the mandatory stage starts at five years of age, in kindergarten. This limits universal access to the education system for the early childhood population, depending on their families' socioeconomic class.

Figure 1 shows higher attendance to educational and care institutions when households are in a wealthier quartile. While in households in the poorest quartile (0), only 36% of children attend these institutions. In the case of households in the wealthiest quartile (4), they reach 47% of attendance. This shows that the socioeconomic possibilities of households condition the first stage in the educational process in Colombia.

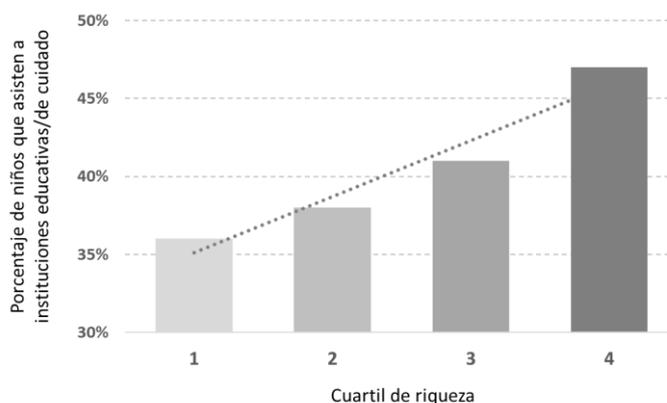


Figure 1

Early Childhood Population Attendance to Educational/Care Institutions, Graph description from left and bottom: Percentage of children attending educational or care institutions / wealth quartile. Percentage of children aged five or under attending educational or care institutions, according to wealth quartiles calculated from an index of holding assets by household (1=25% poorest; and so on, up to the quartile that includes the 25% richest) (García et. al., 2021)

The gaps in access to early childhood education establish the first differences in school performance. These are related to belonging to the public or private education system and, therefore, to belonging to a household with a lower or higher level of wealth. There is a test called the Peabody Visual Imagery Vocabulary Test (Prueba de Vocabulario de Imágenes Visuales Peabody - TVIP), which measures school skills that correlate with different intelligence tests. When this test was submitted to the Colombian Longitudinal Survey by Universidad de Los Andes in Colombia, it was found that children belonging to households of a lower wealth quintile enter public institutions and obtain lower results. On the contrary, children in households in the highest wealth quintile go to private institutions and obtain better results in the TVIP test (see Figure 2).

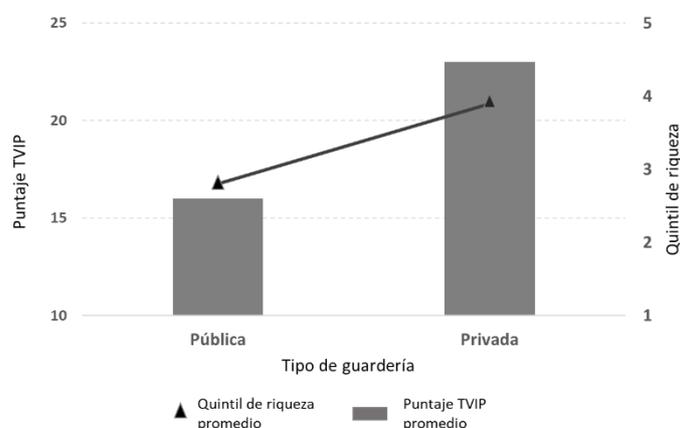


Figure 2

Verbal Ability and Household Wealth by Type of Nursery School

[Graph description from left to right and from bottom to top: TVIP score / Wealth Quintile / Average Wealth Quintile / Average TVIP score / Type of Nursery School / Public / Private]

Note: The left vertical axis measures the average scores on the Peabody Visual Imagery Vocabulary Test - TVIP, by type of nursery school, for three-year-old children. The right vertical axis measures the average wealth quintile of children’s households, calculated from a household asset index. Public nursery schools include official daycare centers, preschools, kindergartens, and community homes, children's homes and community kindergartens of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar). (García et. al., 2021)

These gaps are highly significant as they set the course of future school performance, which is related to the level of household wealth. In addition, school performance is subsumed by the education system; so the fact that students with a lower performance from households in the lowest wealth quintiles enter the public system reinforces the idea of segregation in the education system from their first education stage. This definitely establishes strong social class and contextual conditions for those children who belong to vulnerable households, but there are possibilities of overcoming such barriers, mostly through personal talent. While children in households in the wealthiest quintile smoothly experience their everyday life, the other children who face all kinds of educational and social barriers must use all their talents to escape the traps of the unequal structure of society and education system.

The following stages in the levels of education are primary and secondary (Five grades in elementary school, compulsory). Although these have shown some

improvement in coverage in Colombia, there are still significant gaps compared to other countries in the region (see Figure 3).

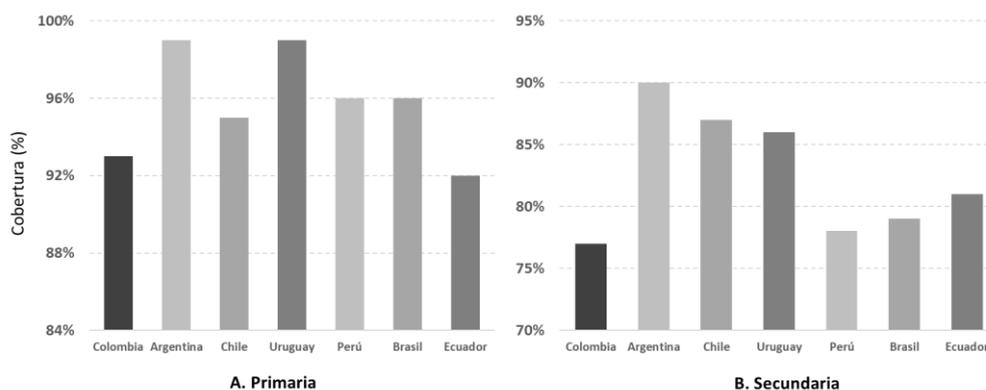


Figure 3

Net Coverage in Primary and Secondary education, Colombia vs. some Countries in Latin America

[Graph description from left to right and from bottom to top: Coverage (%) / A. Primary: Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador / B. Secondary: Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador]

Note: Net coverage for each level refers to the proportion of children of the age to attend that level of education and who are enrolled (“overage” students excluded). (García et. al., 2021)

As budget allocation is based on the capitation criterion, which considers the number of students enrolled in school, there has been a substantial effort to expand coverage in primary and secondary education. Gross coverage at these levels of education in Colombia reached 97.5% in 2019, being higher than the Latin American average of 95.4%. However, the national picture is not favorable when comparing it with net coverage. The global net coverage for primary and secondary education reached 77.5% in 2019, being lower than in Latin America, which was 83.4%. This difference in gross and net coverage results can be explained by the high incidence of overage, caused by high repetition rates, mainly in the public system.

A separate comparison of primary and secondary net coverage (see Figure 3) shows lower levels of coverage in Colombia than in other countries. This is attributable to multiple social and contextual phenomena, where performance gaps associated with early childhood education play an important role. “While

vulnerable households manage to complete a maximum of one year of early childhood education (kindergarten), families in a better socioeconomic condition can ensure this level of education from between 3 and 4 years (nursery school)” (Saaveda and Forero, 2019). This creates a “snowball” effect in performance and permanence in the education system once progress is made, although this effect is more marked and evident in the public system.

While there has been progress in coverage, no improvements in the quality of education or student performance have occurred. According to the PISA (2019) test results, which measures reading, mathematics and science skills in 15-year-olds, there are significant gaps with the OECD [0] average (see Figures 4 and 5). As expressed by Fergusson and Flórez (2021), these gaps in results mostly appear by region, fuelling segregation dynamics in education by class and region. Therefore, contextual traps intensify, reinforcing the inequalities reproduced by the national education system.

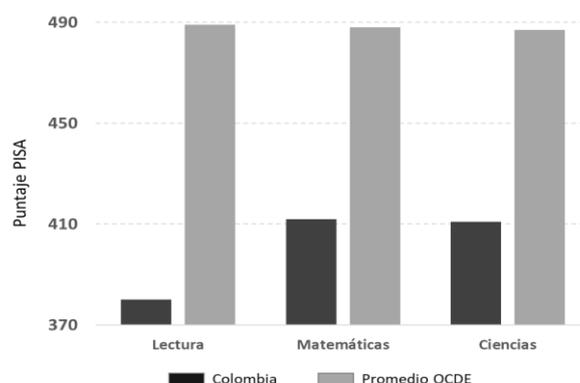


Figure 4

PISA Test Results, Colombia vs. OECD

[Graph description from left to right and from bottom to top: PISA score / Colombia / OECD average / Reading, Mathematics, Science]. Performance in reading, mathematics and science areas on a scale from 0 to 100. (García et. al., 2021)

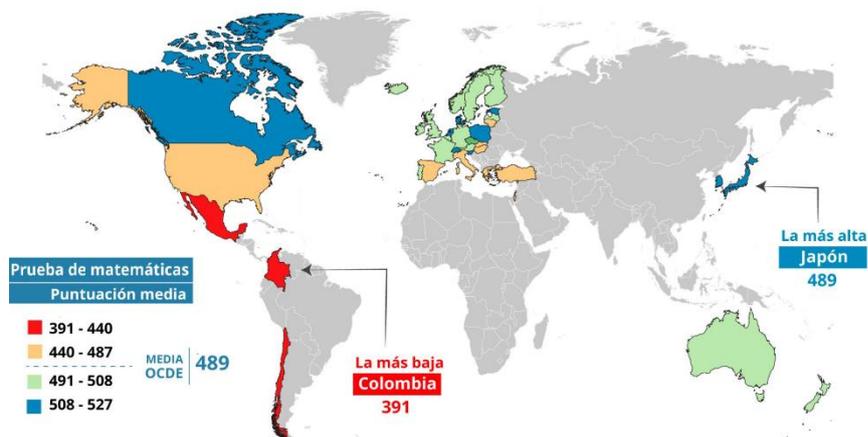


Figure 5

PISA Test Results, Colombia vs. OECD, Mathematics

[Image description: Mathematics test / Average score / OECD average / The lowest, Colombia / The highest, Japan). Performance in reading, mathematics and science areas on a scale from 0 to 100. (OCDE, 2019)

To further explore the relationship between educational performance, belonging to the public or private system, and level of wealth, the *Saber 11* test results are analyzed. This test evaluates secondary education. Figure 6 clearly shows higher test scores when household income increases.

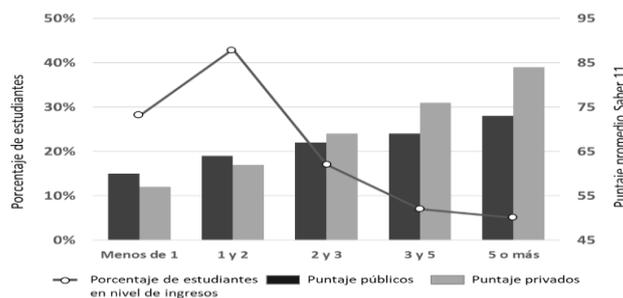


Figure 6

Average Performance in *Saber 11* Test by Household Income and Type of School

[Graph description from left to right and from bottom to top: Percentage of students / Saber 11 average score / Percentage of students in X income level / Public schools score / Private schools score / Below 1; 1 and 2; 2 and 3; 3 and 5; 5 or over]. The left vertical axis measures the proportion of students in each income range. The right vertical axis measures public and

private schools' performance on the Saber 11 test. (García et. al., 2021; Saavedra and Forero, 2019)

Furthermore, no significant differences are observed in public and private schools for students belonging to households with 5 minimum wages income or below. This suggests that the private system also has major gaps in the quality of education and performance, thus creating a perverse phenomenon. This is a situation in which middle and low-income households send their children to private schools due to status criteria, but do not find any education differential. This is where the mercantile nature of education in Colombia becomes evident. There is only one gap in performance for the high-income level (5 or over), which is represented by 5% of young people belonging to households with incomes over 5 minimum wages.

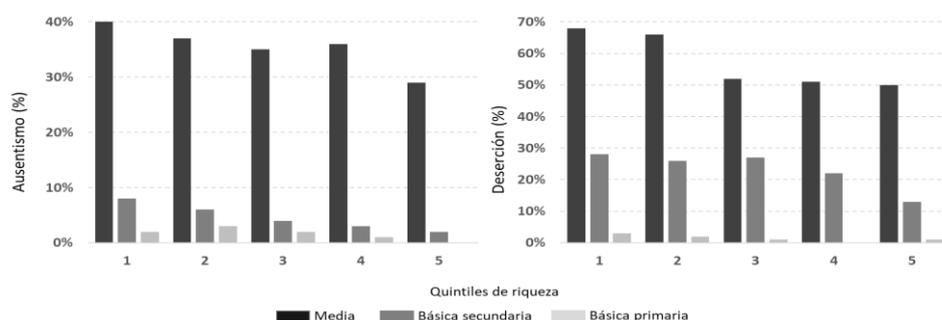


Figure 7

Percentage of Educational Absenteeism and Dropout by Wealth Level

[Graph description from left to right and from bottom to top: Absenteeism (%) / Dropout (%) / High School / Middle School / Elementary School / Wealth Quintiles]. Wealth quintiles (1 corresponds to the poorest 20%, and so on, up to quintile 5, which includes the richest 20%) are calculated from an index that combines household assets, particularly housing characteristics and physical asset ownership. The absenteeism rate calculated for 2013 shows the percentage of household children in each age range who do not attend school; in high school (students between 16 and 18 years old), middle school (students between 12 and 15 years old), and elementary school (between 6 and 11 years old). For the same age groups, the dropout rate represents the proportion of people who attended school in 2013, but stopped going in 2016. (García et. al., 2021; Saavedra and Forero, 2019)

Another relevant figure showing gaps related to permanence in the education system is the percentage of people in an age range to study, who report not going to school. The absenteeism rate is higher when belonging to a lower

wealth quintile, and especially at the high school level. While 40% of people between 15 and 18 years of age in wealth quintile 1 do not attend any educational institution, the percentage of absenteeism in this same age range but in the highest quintile (5) reaches 28%. In middle and elementary school, the gaps by wealth level are not so wide.

In addition to the already worrisome level of absenteeism in high school, there is a high dropout rate (Students dropping out of the school system due to a set of factors arising from both within the education system and social, family, individual and environmental contexts.). 68% of high schoolers from the lowest quintile (0), who had attended school in 2013, were no longer studying in 2016 [0]. Although dropout and absenteeism have the same gaps related to belonging to a wealth level, the dropout from middle and high school constitutes a bigger challenge for the education system. This is because it is a source of escaping education, even when aware of the implications, in a country as unequal as Colombia.

Most of the data presented show the importance of socioeconomic context in school permanence and performance in Colombia. It is an environment that depends significantly on the household level of wealth/income, and therefore reinforces the idea of segregation in the Colombian education system.

Tertiary (Post-secondary) education: Higher education

The Colombian education system creates large gaps in education and school performance at all levels of education, which come from whether the student belongs to the public or private system and whether they belong to a household with a lower or higher wealth and income level. Moreover, 19% of elementary and middle school students and 23% of high school are in the private sector. However, this percentage changes according to the geographic location (regions). For example, in rural areas or small towns, the learning process occurs mainly in public schools, while in large cities, there is a greater offer of private education programs. As for higher education, the percentage of students in the private system reaches 47%, being higher than the OECD average for this level of education, which reaches 30% (OCDE, 2019).

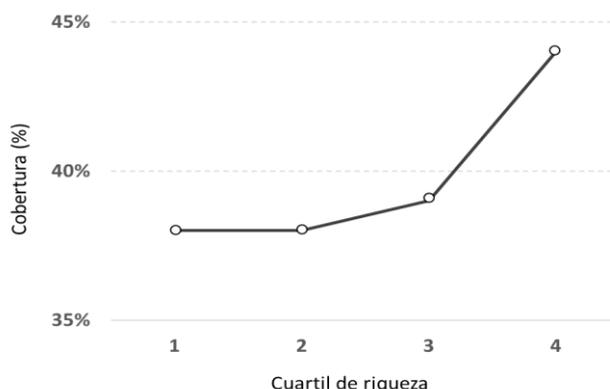


Figure 8

Enrollment in Higher Education by Wealth Quartile

[Graph description: Coverage (%) / Wealth Quartile]. Proportion of people of age to attend higher education enrolled in higher education institutions. (Amaya, 2013; Bernal, 2012)

The higher education structure in Colombia has inherited inequality. From the primary education system since access to this level of education varies depending on the wealth quartile, as shown in Figure 8.

Similarly, inequality can be observed in the transition and adaptation from high school to university, where also some difficulties in social integration appear. This increases the risk of dropping out and contributes to intellectual immaturity and a lack of previous knowledge, failing to meet the academic demands in the first University semesters.

This transition period, where a student moves from high school to higher education, is full of complexities, including: differences in how teaching and evaluation systems work, the most variable communication processes with professors, and the separation from the usual group of friends. At this stage, where students need to look for new relationships with peers, they may feel less supported and thus be at a higher risk of dropping out. (Feixás et. al., 2015; Figuera and Torrado, 2013)

In this regard, during the National Policy for Higher Education presentation by the Ministry of National Education, dropout was referred to as a “highly important issue for the new policy.” This is due to the high figures it has represented for the nation and families; for example, the dropout reported in

Colombia in 2009 cost the country about 221 billion pesos, constituting 12% of the nation's total contributions. For families, the expenditure was 337 billion pesos, totaling approximately 550 billion pesos. (MENC, 2017; Rueda et. al., 2020)

Although, according to DANE (Gutiérrez, Díaz and López, 2021), coverage for higher education in Colombia has increased, there is a difference of almost 8% between the lowest quartile (36%) and the highest quartile (44%). Such a gap is attributable to different factors ranging from: the lack of economic resources to access to the private system; the differences in performance that limit access to public higher education since access is determined by the results of the *Saber 11* test (The *Prueba Saber 11* is a test that evaluates the Secondary Education level in Colombia and is aligned with Primary Education evaluations. Its purpose is to provide information to the educational community on the development of students' basic competencies, which are expected to be acquired during their school life), and the opportunity costs of studying given the need to work; among others.

Figure 9 illustrates the context given above. 43% of students who take the *Saber 11* test belong to the lower social class (level 1), and only 1% to the upper class (level 6). However, only 12% of lower class (level 1) students are able to access higher education, while access for upper class (level 6) students reaches 53%. As one belongs to a higher social class, the probability of access to higher education is greater. This shows significant gaps of a segregationist nature inherited from the education system.

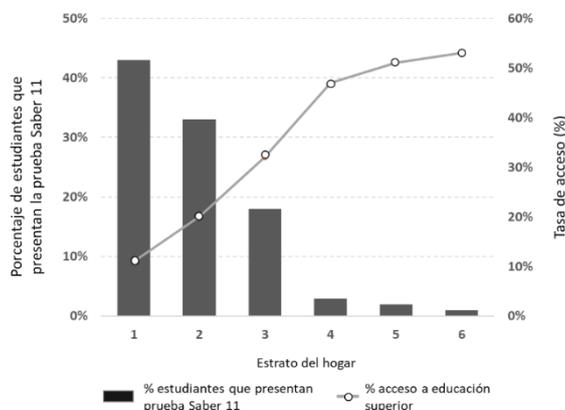


Figure 9

Students' Social Class in the *Saber 11* Test and Access to Tertiary Education

[Graph description from left to right, top to bottom: Percentage of students taking the *Saber 11* test / Access rate (%) / Household social class/ % of students taking the *Saber 11* test / % of access to higher education]. The left axis represents the distribution of students by a socioeconomic class who take the *Saber 11* test. The right axis indicates the access rate to higher education by socioeconomic class. The access rate corresponds to the percentage of students who take the *Saber 11* test and are enrolled in a higher education institution in the semester following the one in which they took the test. (Amaya, 2013; Burbano, 2021)

The gap in the dropout rate by socioeconomic class is another element that boosts the reproduction of inequalities in the Colombian education system, including higher education (see Figure 10). Between 2010 and 2019, the average dropout rate of students from lower class (level 1), upper lower class (level 2), and middle class (level 3) was 63%, and that of students from upper middle class (level 4), lower upper class (level 5), and upper class (level 6) was 8% with differentiated dynamics over time. While for the first three social class levels dropout increased, for the other three (levels 4, 5, and 6) decreased. The education system does not guarantee full access to higher education, nor does it provide permanence mechanisms for lower class students, thus reinforcing the traps related to expectations of the education system.

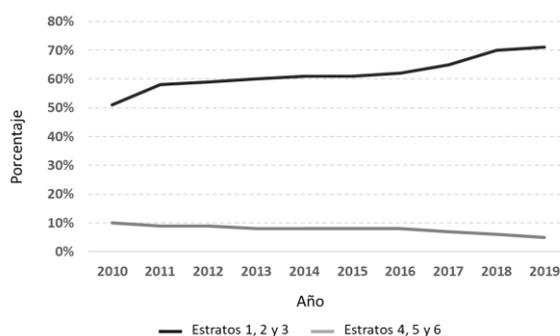


Figure 10

University Dropout Rate by Socioeconomic Class, 2010 - 2019

[Graph description from left and from top to bottom: Percentage / Year / Social class levels 1, 2, and 3 / Social class levels 4, 5, and 6]. (Gutiérrez, Díaz and López, 2021)

The lack of consolidation of trade schools and apprenticeship programs education is also a factor showing the social class variable of the Colombian education system. For example, of the total number of lower class (level 1)

students who manage to access higher education, 79% access university education, 13% access an apprenticeship program and 8% access trade school. In the case of upper class (level 6) students, 97% access university education, 2% access an apprenticeship program and only 1% access trade school. This produces income gaps as the average salaries for graduates from trade schools and apprenticeship programs in Colombia are significantly lower than those earned from a university degree.

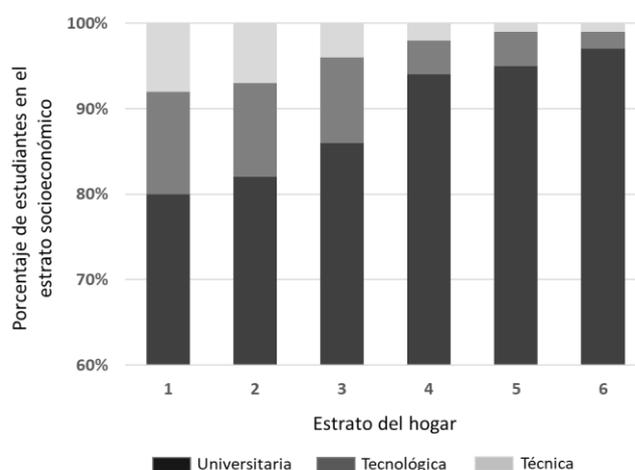


Figure 11

Students' Social class by Type of Tertiary Education

[Graph description from left and from top to bottom: Percentage of students in a social class / Household social class / University / Apprenticeship program / Trade School]. Percentage of new students at each tertiary education modality in the first semester of the year, as a proportion of the total number of new students in a social class. (Amaya, 2013; Gutiérrez, Díaz and López, 2021)

As can be observed, the Colombian education system does not provide any leveling in its levels of education at any point; on the contrary, as the learning process moves forward, segregation becomes more pronounced, increasingly widening the gaps related to belonging to a wealth level and to the public or private system.

Reproduction of inequalities through the education system

Educational gaps resulting from social differences produce a status quo for social mobility, a problem for historically unequal societies such as Colombia. In modernity, the education system is the main mechanism for social mobility; however, when it reinforces basic social inequalities, it destroys the population's expectations of improvement. This situation increases the establishment of criminal structures and illegal or underproductive economic practices, making it impossible for the population to generate competitive dynamics mainly associated with value creation from knowledge.

When analyzing the PISA test results again, but this time filtering results by public and private schools, performance gaps are clearly seen. This is a problem as language and mathematics competencies are the constituents of people's critical and logical thinking and therefore are responsible for enhancing or limiting their future performance at work or a higher education institution.

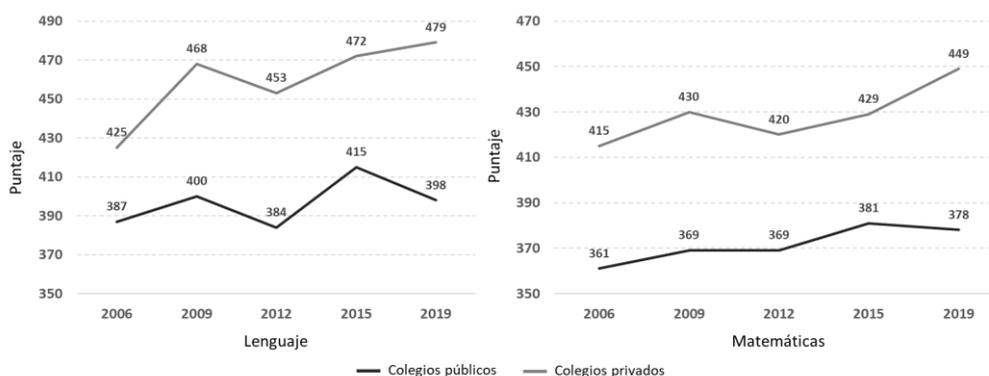


Figure 12

PISA Test Results, Public and Private Schools Average 2006 - 2018

[Graph description from left to right, top to bottom: Score / Score / Language / Mathematics / Public schools / Private schools]. (Gutiérrez, Díaz and López, 2021)

These gaps are not just the result of the pedagogical space and the differences in infrastructure and equipment in the public and private systems; rather, they respond to a series of relative student deprivations in their relational contexts. When observing Figure 13, overall, access to electricity in public and private institutions, both urban and rural, does not seem to be a problem. However,

there is still 17% of rural public institutions with no access to electricity. As for access to internet, there are larger gaps, especially in the rural public system. While the average internet access in the different categories is 89%, in rural public institutions, this access is only 18%.

Although the current national government has developed the *Centros Poblados* strategy, where rural public institutions were targeted to provide them with connectivity and improve their technological equipment, there have been corruption scandals during the implementation of this program, which have slowed down its execution. This confirms a lack of political will to bridge social gaps through the education system.

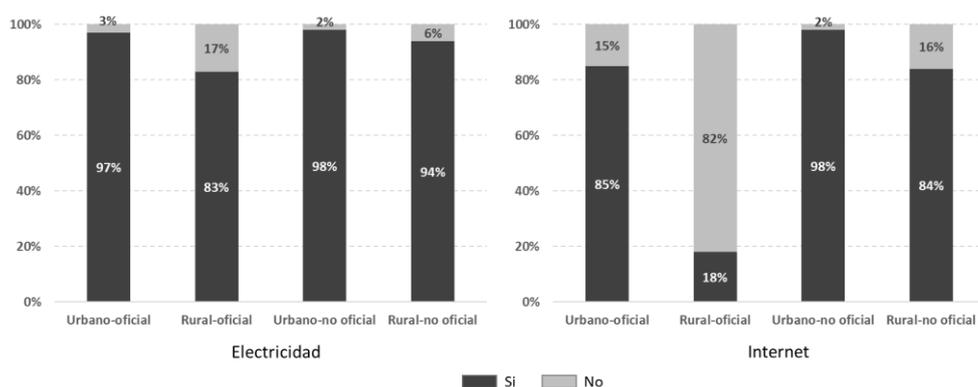


Figure 13

Electricity and Internet Availability in Educational Institutions

[Graph description: Electricity / Internet / Yes / No / Urban public schools / Rural public schools / Urban private schools / Rural private schools]. (Burbano, 2021)

Inquiring about the students' perception of connectivity and technological device availability, both in their educational institution and at home, a self-representation gap is observed (see Figure 13). While 17% of students in public institutions (15% from rural public schools and 19% from urban public) consider having a considerable number of technological devices providing connectivity, in private institutions this reaches 72%.

When asked about Internet speed, 88% of students in public institutions (91% from rural public schools and 85% from urban public) consider that it is efficient. On the contrary, in private institutions, only 32% of students are satisfied with

the browsing speed. Surprisingly, this shows that the lack of good connectivity is valued as efficient when there are not sufficient and appropriate devices nor technological devices integrated into pedagogical and didactic practices in the public education system (urban and rural) as these are not permanently used. In contrast, in private institutions where technological devices are commonly used during lessons, their constant updating produces connectivity problems, resulting in low student scores. The infrastructure limitations in the education system reduce the capacity of integrated pedagogical and didactic practices, thus affecting the current learning process significantly.

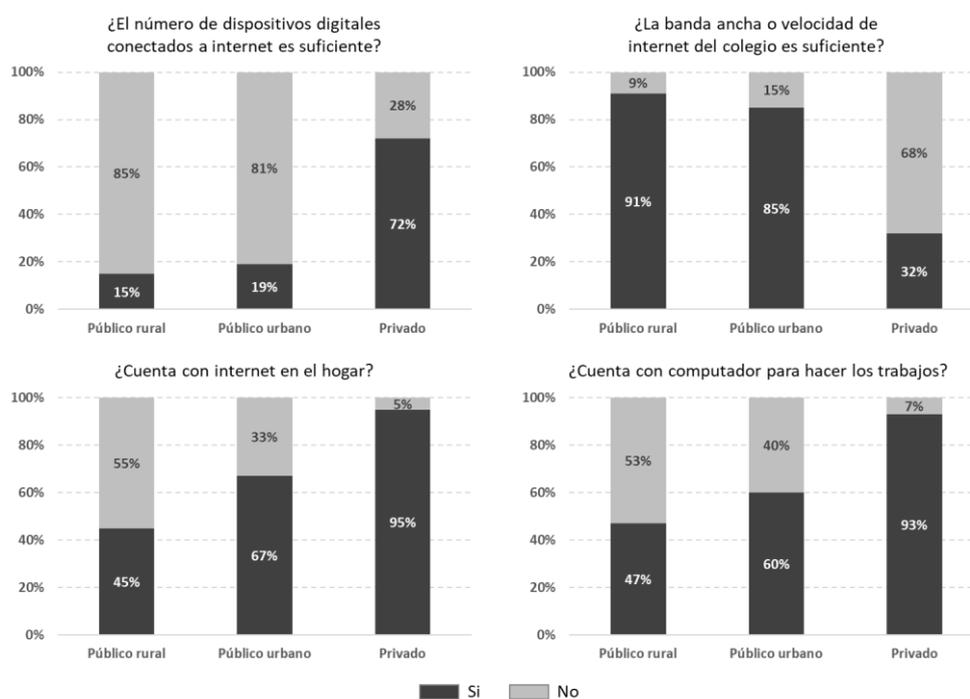


Figure 14

Students' Perception of Connectivity Conditions and Technological Devices Availability
 [Graph description: Questions: is there a sufficient number of digital devices connected to the Internet? / Do you have an internet connection at home? / Is there suitable broadband or browsing speed at school? / Do you have a computer to do your homework? Bars information: Rural public school / Urban public school / Private school / Information at the bottom: Yes / No].
 (Burbano, 2021; Gutiérrez, Díaz and López, 2021)

When analyzing the home level, gaps are evident. While 56% of students in public institutions (45% in rural public schools and 67% in urban public) have an

internet connection at home, this figure reaches 95% in students in private institutions. Gaps are similar when asked about computer availability at home.

All these elements reinforce the traps of the Colombian education system since it inherits social inequalities, with no mechanisms and possibilities of escape such exclusion, reproducing the persistent inequality in the country through the quality of education, performance, and social class.

Conclusions

Education in Colombia reproduces a social class phenomenon, creating a kind of social segregation. This results in a lack of intergenerational social mobility spread by the education system. Hence educational traps, which prevent the bridging of socioeconomic gaps and the harmonization of cultural differences.

Although there has been progress in the constitutional, regulatory, and jurisprudential development of the right to education, there are still lags for its actual fulfillment. After thirty years of the 1991 Constitution, there are still some unresolved tasks, such as the gap in access to education, including permanence, coverage and, therefore, quality. Education cannot continue to be a privilege for some as it is a right and a public service with social purposes. It is the most powerful tool for the transformation and evolution of society towards inclusive construction with social and environmental justice.

It is important to prioritize the reformulation of the current national education policy regulations to guarantee the students' and educational institutions' continuation in the first, secondary and post-secondary education system. This would lead to society's evolution and determine education's true nature, not as a mercantilist entity, but as a scenario for transformation and social innovation. Thus, medium and long-term changes need actions with new practices and purposes to achieve the goals set. In this way, it would be possible to rebuild an institutional and social culture where education becomes a relevant force of change for Colombia, especially in the times we live in.

Education in Colombia must allow students to perceive, feel and understand the appreciation and valuation of their culture through their academic environment. In that sense, policies and curricula must be socially and environmentally relevant. Additionally, through cooperation, solidarity and participation, the society's progress, and especially that of all the education community members, must be valued. Such actions would promote the common good and students would be placed in scenarios of inclusion, in the phenomenology of praxis that imply a major transformation of their knowledge acquisition processes and of their own knowledge coming from the ethnic and educational axis.

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