Are parental education expectations an additional barrier for Indigenous children learning?

Blog

Cross-national studies

Social barriers to education

Nomad, minority and migrant education

The case of Latin America using evidence from the TERCE learning survey

At the beginning of 2019, UNESCO launched the International Year of Indigenous Languages because of their relevance for sustainable development, peace building and reconciliation, and as a way to raise awareness about their alarming disappearance. This is embedded in a historical process where Indigenous populations have suffered discrimination and exclusion.

In this context, using the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) for Latin America, I examined the role of unexplored mechanisms of learning inequality for Indigenous students: the role of parental educational expectations. I found that context matters on the formation and transition of educational expectations for Indigenous children learning. Any informed debate about Indigenous people within the SDG Agenda should incorporate the role of schooling expectations as a source of learning-inequality.

1. Introduction

Two SDG targets, Goal 2 on Zero Hunger (target 2.3) and Goal 4 on education (target 4.5), as well as targets on land rights, are directly applicable to Indigenous populations. There is also an emphasis on equity within SDG4, stressing the need for further disaggregation on indicators to narrow education disparities in vulnerable groups, and highlighting the importance of Indigeneity as a key marker to be monitored for education inequality.

Progress on narrowing Indigenous learning gaps requires an empirical evaluation of the drivers of inequality, which tend to fall into two categories:
• Internal – a different treatment of individuals with the same characteristics due to historical racial hierarchy imposed through colonisation.
• External – given by external constraints and inequality in the access to factors or assets because of poverty and location.

However, expectations on the future educational prospects of children are key, as they are the result of a cumulative entrenched cultural process that determines Indigenous children’s integration in their societies, and their contribution to sustainable development. In fact, Indigenous education has proved to be an effective strategy in combating climate change and for environmental sustainability.

Against this backdrop, this year I published an article in the International Journal of Educational Development offering new evidence on whether Indigenous families have lower educational expectations than non-Indigenous families, and whether lower Indigenous parental schooling expectations are also linked to the lower learning of their children.

2. Indigenous information in TERCE

I used three alternative indicators to classify a child as Indigenous (I):

- I1 - one where both parents are Indigenous – around 26% for children attending grade 6 in the sample as a whole.
- I2 - a “mestizo” definition, where only one parent is Indigenous – around 17%.
- I3 - based on the spoken language at home – around 7%, much lower due to the tendency of language replacement in the region partly caused by urban migration and globalisation.

3. Key findings

Indigenous students and expectations gaps

Table 1 shows that:

- Being Indigenous is significantly and negatively associated with parental education expectations, giving some support to the hypothesis that expectations of parents are driven by ethnic differences. All estimated odds ratios (OR) for the Indigenous dummies are below one.
- Example - In Panel A, estimates show that coming from a household where both parents are Indigenous (I1) is related to a 30% (=1−0.702) lower chance of moving from the low to the medium or high expectations groups, and this effect is reduced to 7% (=1−0.932) when student and family (level 1) explanatory variables are controlled for.
- The education expectation gap for Indigenous children disappears when comparing students in similar schools. Hence, Indigenous’ schooling expectations are mostly explained by external constraints.

Table 1. Estimates (odds ratio - OR) for the impact of different definitions of Indigenous on parental education expectations. Multilevel ordered logit (2-levels)
### Education expectations and Indigenous learning

Are lower expectations of parents an additional barrier to learning for Indigenous children?

Table 2 contains the impact of parental education on math and reading scores for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

#### Table 2. Estimation of the impact of different definitions of Indigenous on parental education expectations. Multilevel logit (3-levels)

<table>
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<th>(2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Panel A - Both parents are Indigenous (I1)</strong></td>
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<td>Indigenous OR</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Panel C - Based on language (I3)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Indigenous OR</td>
<td>0.418***</td>
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* Significance level: 10%.
** Significance level: 5%.
*** Significance level: 1%.

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**Are lower expectations of parents an additional barrier to learning for Indigenous children?**

Table 2 contains the impact of parental education on math and reading scores for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.
Table 2 shows that:

- **Parental education expectations matter for student’s achievement.** Example – compared to the low expectation group, the chances of reaching higher levels of achievement in reading (level 3 and 4 knowledge) for children whose parents have higher expectations is between 1.3 and 2.1 times higher.

- **Indigenous students perform worse in math and reading than non-Indigenous children;** the group most affected is I3 (Panel C) based on language, with OR of 0.197–0.120. This perhaps underscores Indigenous students’ difficulty in accessing the curriculum in a second language.

- **There is mixed evidence on the impact of expectations being an additional barrier to Indigenous children.** Parental expectations equally affect the learning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, only being an additional source of disadvantage in the case of reading and for Indigenous mixed groups.

### 4. Conclusions

Taking stock of results, they can be summarised by three conclusions:
The education expectations gap for Indigenous parents do not hold when external constraints are considered (at the family and school levels). This suggests a lower importance of the internal/family channel on how these expectations are formed. Schools are key in the formation of expectations.

Parental education expectations are a strong channel driving students’ achievement but only for children classified as Indigenous based on language, when comparing students with the same background.

These two results indicate that the wider context has a leading role on the formation and transition of educational expectations towards Indigenous children's learning, with exclusion operating more at a social than a cultural level.

5. Policy implications

The analysis showed in this blog leads to the following implications:

1. An **overreaching-conceptual implication** is that a debate about Indigenous children within the SDG Agenda should incorporate the role of schooling expectations as a source of learning-inequality.

2. Concrete **policy implications** are:

   - The definition of Indigeneity is crucial for benchmarking inequality; this provides support for an intercultural bilingual education (IBE) model.
   - Policies for identifying pockets of expectations and failure in Indigenous communities should be designed beyond individual and family characteristics and focus on communities based on schools' characteristics.
   - For the expectations-learning association, targeting Indigenous students based on some of their individual's markers of disadvantage (e.g., initial ability/repetition, low parental education input, parents' work stability and education) could be fruitful as could raising schools’ overall level of educational expectations of parents.
   - Further policy efforts are needed when it comes to Indigenous students who speak Aboriginal languages at home, as it is for this group where the internal channel or discrimination hypothesis has some sort of validity. To this effect, the IBE model has the potential to lower achievement gaps during the first grades of primary education.