



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Santiago Office  
Regional Bureau for Education in  
Latin America and the Caribbean

Number 4  
June 2016

terae

THIRD REGIONAL COMPARATIVE AND EXPLANATORY STUDY

IN SIGHT

# What affects learning achievements among migrant children?

- ▶ When comparing the learning achievements of migrant and non-migrant students in third and sixth grade, it is observed that migrant children achieve lower academic performance levels.
- ▶ These lower results in learning achievements do not apply to the entirety of this student population. There are associated factors that influence the learning of these students such as the socioeconomic level of migrant families.
- ▶ Education systems in the region have not yet been able to overcome performance gaps or provide support to vulnerable populations. Practices and initiatives are recommended that are aimed at supporting migrant children and their families in order to make it easier for them to integrate.

Within the framework of ***Sustainable Development Goal 4***, UNESCO has been entrusted with leading and coordinating the Education 2030 agenda, and ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality

education and lifelong learning for all. In line with this new education agenda, UNESCO has committed to confronting all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access, participation, and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2015a).

Human mobility has reached its highest levels in history, both internationally as well as within each country. It is estimated that one out of every seven inhabitants of the planet is a migrant in today's world, which adds up to around one billion people. Migratory flows are increasing, given that different reasons are encouraging an ever increasing number of people to relocate to another country. These changes in human mobility have a significant impact on education (UNESCO, 2015b).

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), migrant students are generally at a disadvantage. This is because their performance can be affected by their educational experiences in other countries, the fact that they enter a different educational system or, in some cases, because they must learn a new language, along with the rest of their family members (OECD, 2010).

Large-scale international studies, such as PISA 2009, TIMSS 2007, and PIRLS 2006, are consistent in indicating that migrant status is associated with low learning results, both in OECD and non-OECD countries (Martin et al., 2008; Mullis et al., 2008; Mullis et al., 2007; OECD, 2010).

## SITUATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

According to the *Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE)*, migrant children in the region achieve lower levels of academic performance than non-migrant children<sup>1</sup>. TERCE considers migrant students to be those students who, like their parents, were born in a foreign country. This status only applies to 4.2% of students<sup>2</sup> in the study's participating countries, of which Panama (5%), Argentina (2.1%), Costa Rica (2%), and Mexico (1.8%) are the countries with a larger proportion of migrant students than the regional average (0.9%).

When observing the learning achievements compared between migrant and non-migrant students, clear differences are discerned between both groups. In third grade, non-migrant children achieve higher performance levels, in both reading and mathematics. This is in contrast to migrant children where more than half fall below Level III.

<sup>1</sup> The study establishes four performance levels, with Level I being the lowest and Level IV the highest.  
<sup>2</sup> When analyzing the effects of this variable, only participating countries that have a percentage of migrant students greater than 1% were included, whether in third grade, sixth grade or both. Countries with percentages below 1% due to differences less than the standard error were not included. Countries that did not meet this condition, and consequently, were not included in the analysis of this variable were Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Uruguay.



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**Santiago Office**  
Regional Bureau for Education in  
Latin America and the Caribbean



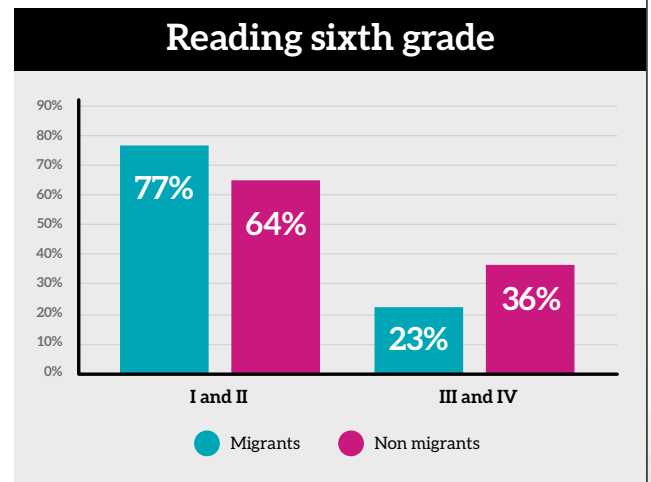
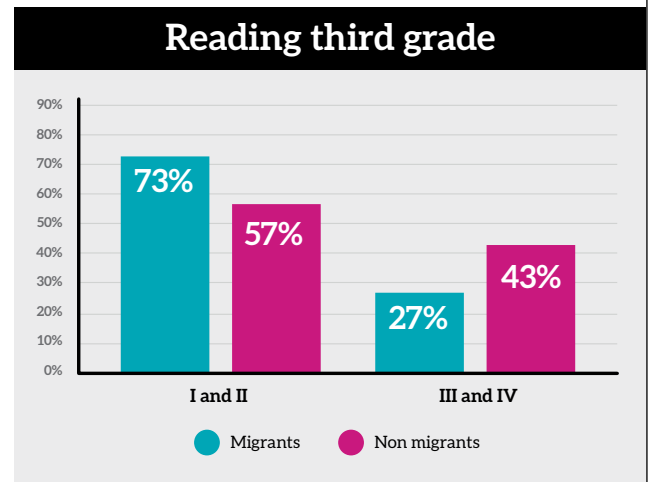
**IN SIGHT**

Number **4**

This trend is repeated in sixth grade in the three subject areas evaluated (reading, mathematics, and natural sciences), where non-migrant students not only surpass migrant students, but rather the differences observed in third grade remain the same between both groups.

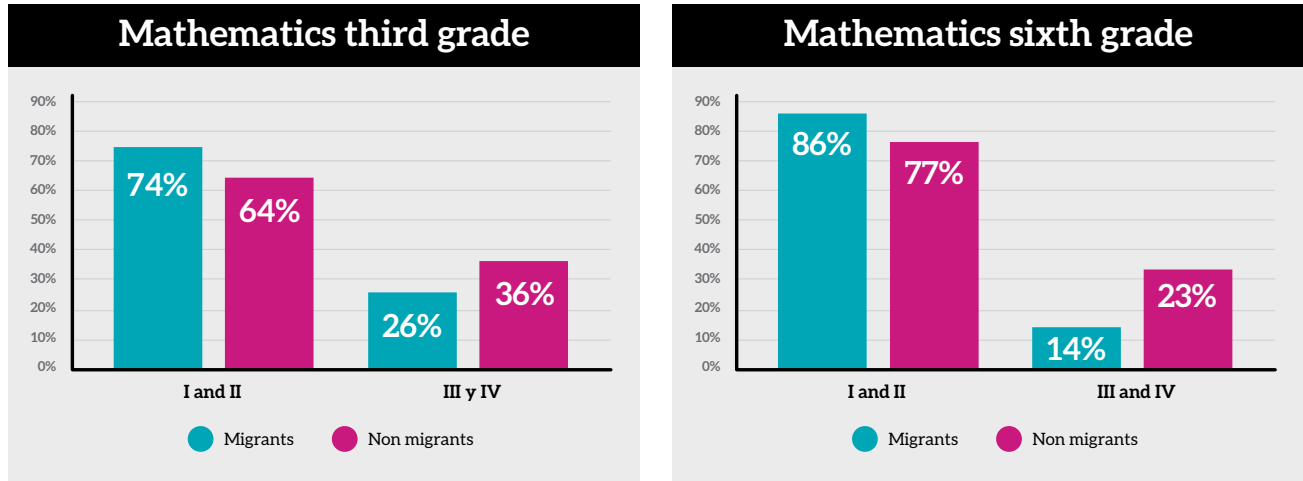
The joint distribution of students at different performance levels can be observed in graphs 1 and 2. The graphs reveal that migrant and non-migrant students are concentrated in both grades and academic disciplines at the lowest performance levels (I and II). However, it should be noted that in terms of percentage, the distribution of migrant students is systematically higher than of non-migrant students at these levels. It is also worth noting that in the assessment of sixth grade mathematics, the concentration of migrant students at the lowest levels of performance reaches 85.5% (graph 2).

**Graph 1: Differences in reading performance levels in third and sixth grade**





Graph 2: Differences in mathematics performance levels in third and sixth grade



Source: Own elaboration based on TERCE data. [Link to Excel file.](#)

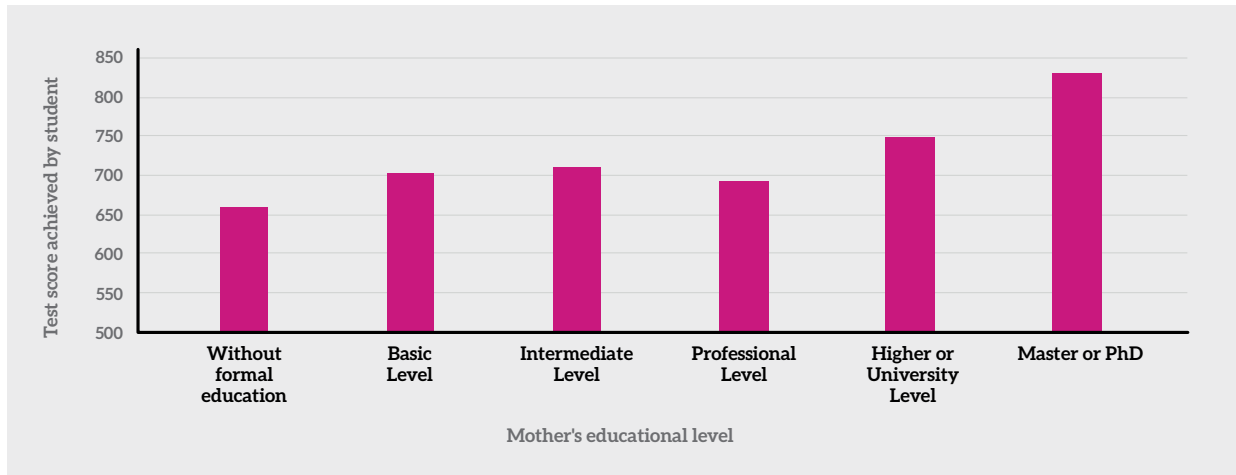
As indicated by TERCE, although migrant status is associated with a negative impact on academic performance in comparison with other children, this does not apply to the entirety of migrant students in the region. In this regard, the lower academic performance could be explained by considering the variables of parents' socioeconomic and educational levels.

According to TERCE, almost 50% of migrant families are in the two lowest quintiles of socioeconomic levels, in comparison with the homogeneous distribution of non-migrant families. It is for this reason that migrant status, along with students' low socioeconomic levels, are variables that could explain low academic results of students.

TERCE reveals the impact that the formal academic education of parents has on the learning achievements of migrant children. The study results demonstrate that the parents' educational level, especially the mother's educational level, influences the academic performance of children; the child's performance level increases as the educational level completed by the parents increases. This suggests that learning results of children increase in relation to higher academic levels reached by the mother. As shown in graph 3, the academic performance of migrant children increases 129 points when the mother has obtained a master's or doctoral degree instead of when she has only completed elementary education.



Graph 3: Mother's educational level in relation to student performance



Source: Own elaboration based on TERCE data. [Link to Excel file.](#)

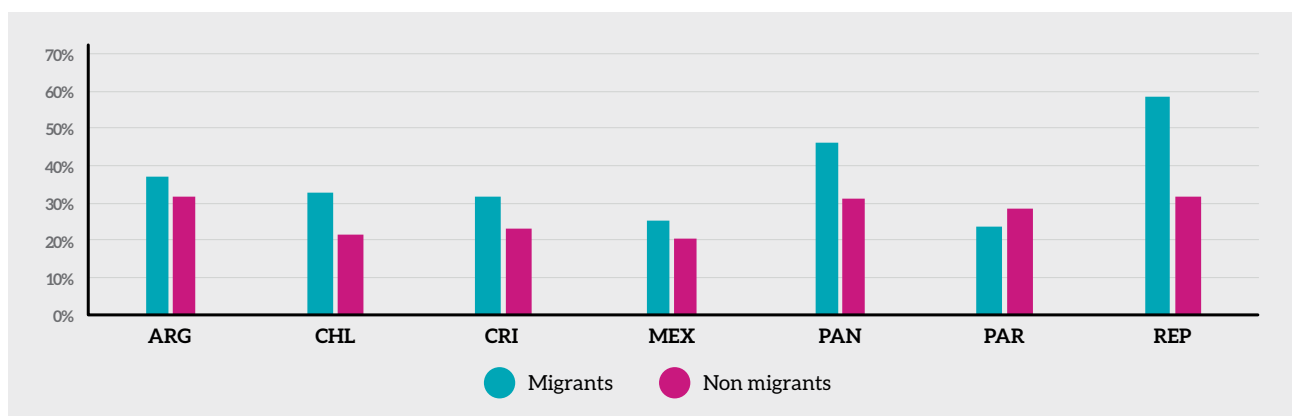
Parent expectations concerning the educational level their children will reach also have important repercussions on academic performance. High expectations can translate into practices that support and motivate the student. TERCE compares the learning results of students whose parents expect that they complete higher education with those parents who hold lower expectations. In general, the extent of the association between expectations and academic achievement tends to decrease when the socioeconomic level of the student is considered. This suggests that parents from sectors with greater economic resources have higher expectations about the future educational level of their children. On average, 53.9% of parents believe that their child will reach higher education, compared with 34.6% of migrant parents.

As such, according to the TERCE findings, migrant status is associated with lower academic performance. However, this factor is no more decisive than the parents' socioeconomic and educational levels, as these factors offer more evidential explanations of the circumstances under which learning takes place. Therefore, although migrant status and associated factors could explain low levels of academic performance, this should not be understood as a causal relationship when establishing evaluative judgments that restrict their capacities for academic improvement.

Apart from these factors, it is also important to consider the cultural context when discussing the academic performance of migrant students. In this regard, the Organization of American States (OAS), apart from the disruption of studies and recognition of



Graph 4: Percentage of children suffering from bullying



Source: Developed with data from TERCE. [Link to Excel file.](#)

educational certificates, makes reference to the importance of the language, cultural integration, uprooting from the country of origin, separation of families and their reuniting (OAS, 2009). Due to their migrant status, many children face problems that go beyond the family situation and are linked to the intercultural relations they experience in the countries of destination. These go from different types of school-related violence or racism based on skin color, to their way of speaking and using or not-using certain expressions, to social and cultural customs. According to TERCE, migrant children suffer more bullying in all countries evaluated, with the exception of Paraguay (graph 4).

This type of experience with violence affects children and has negative consequences that are manifested in poorer academic performance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Migratory trends represent an increasingly frequent phenomenon that also affects Latin America and the Caribbean, where various forms of migration are constantly becoming a common occurrence. As such, it is necessary to include the topic of migration in public and social policies of the countries in the region. Migrant status entails various consequences for students, but educational policies aimed at encouraging better integration can have significant effects on the academic performance of migrant children.

The region's education systems have not yet been able to overcome performance gaps and provide support to vulnerable populations. In this context, practices



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Santiago Office  
Regional Bureau for Education in  
Latin America and the Caribbean

terce  
THIRD REGIONAL COMPARATIVE AND EXPLANATORY STUDY

IN SIGHT

Number 4

and initiatives aimed at supporting both migrant children and their families are recommended to help them integrate into their new country of residence (Entorf, 2015). Given that student performance tends to increase when their parents have high expectations regarding their achievements, use school information to support their learning processes and supervise the academic development of their children, it is very important to include parents in these new strategies and involve them more in school related matters. Possible initiatives in this regard could, for example, consist of a specific type of education focused on improving linguistic competencies, as well as full-time day school models. In some countries, integration courses have also been created that are intended for a diverse audience, which include migrant youth or unaccompanied minor refugees. These courses not only provide information in a low-threshold manner, but also offer safe spaces for exchange and welcome, thereby providing attendees with necessary tools and preparing them for personal as well as professional development in order to be active members of their host society (IOM, n.d.).

All of these initiatives must specifically correspond to the needs of migrant children. In this regard and above all, the professional designing of a “curriculum” appropriate for the age and day-to-day reality of migrant children is required. It also requires teacher training so that they are aware and capable of managing the existing diversity in the classroom. It is important that cultural diversity is included from the very beginning in educational systems, so that heterogeneity can be understood as normality rather than a deviation from the norm. In this regard, it is essential for teachers to be trained to know how to include the cultural diversity present in schools in the best way possible and how to confront possible situations of racism or exclusion to ensure the wellbeing of migrant children and their families (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2010; UNESCO, 2015b; Entorf, 2015).

The right to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all can only be guaranteed in the region through initiatives directed at the special needs of migrant children in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Coming in our next edition: Teachers



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**Santiago Office**  
Regional Bureau for Education in  
Latin America and the Caribbean



**IN SIGHT**

Number **4**

**Bibliographical references for TERCE in sight No.4**

For more information, contact Adriana Viteri, LLECE technical assistant: [a.viteri@unesco.org](mailto:a.viteri@unesco.org)

**Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE)**

**Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE)**

**TERCE Databases**

*“Terce in sight” is a communicational product of OREALC/UNESCO Santiago aimed at any person interested in educational topics, especially decision-makers. Its objective is to provide analysis on a specific topic that is part of the TERCE findings, and that guides decisions regarding educational policy in the region. The information can be quoted, as long as the source is referenced.*