



United Nations  
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**Santiago Office**  
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Latin America and the Caribbean

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**terce**  
THIRD REGIONAL COMPARATIVE AND EXPLANATORY STUDY

**IN SIGHT**

# Is grade repetition effective?

▶ The results of the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, TERCE, suggest that, in Latin America, students who have repeated a grade at least once score lower results on all exams overall, above all in mathematics and reading.

▶ A student who has repeated a grade tends to score between 15 and 74 points less in terms of academic performance when compared with a student who has never repeated, depending on the grade, subject area, and country, once the influence of the socioeconomic status has been considered.

▶ Repeating a grade must be a last resource for remedying the situation of students falling behind in learning. This resource must be used only in exceptional situations, and while searching for preventative formulas that provide comprehensive support to families, and to children with difficulties in particular.

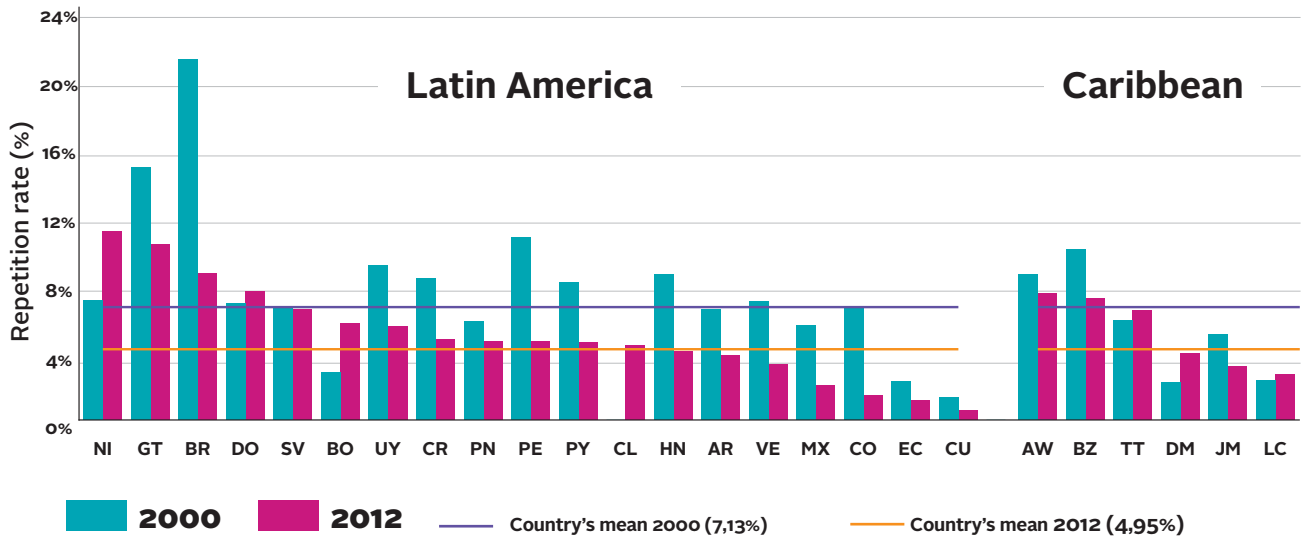
Currently, the consensus surrounding free and universal primary education is practically unanimous. The right to education aims towards the development of skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes that allow all individuals to develop themselves and live in a dignified manner, to make informed decisions in order to improve their quality of life and that of society, and to participate in collective decision-making. During primary education,

the ability to socialise with different people is established, identity is formed, and self-esteem is built (UNESCO, 2012).

Therefore, children must experience seamless schooling processes during this period. However, a significant amount is held back for a second year of the same grade upon determining that they have not achieved the minimum performance level for advancing.



Graph 1: Repetition rate in primary education (all grades), both sexes (%)



Source: Own elaboration based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). [Link to the excel file](#)

## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN LATIN AMERICA?

Considering primary education as a whole, the rate of repetition reached 4.95% in 2012 on average in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (in 2000, it was 7.13%).

According to TERCE, repeating a grade, which is a mechanism for resolving lagging behind in learning, is the variable that has the greatest negative relationship with academic achievement in all of the countries, grades, and subject areas that were assessed.

After considering the socioeconomic status, repeating a grade is the second variable that has the strongest relationship with learning achievements.

As it is shown in graphs 2 and 3, the magnitude of the negative relationship with academic achievement tends to decrease when the influence of the socioeconomic status of the student is accounted.

It is plausible that this occurs because students of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to repeat a grade due to a potential lack of academic support at school that would compensate for the disadvantages they suffer due to their home situation.

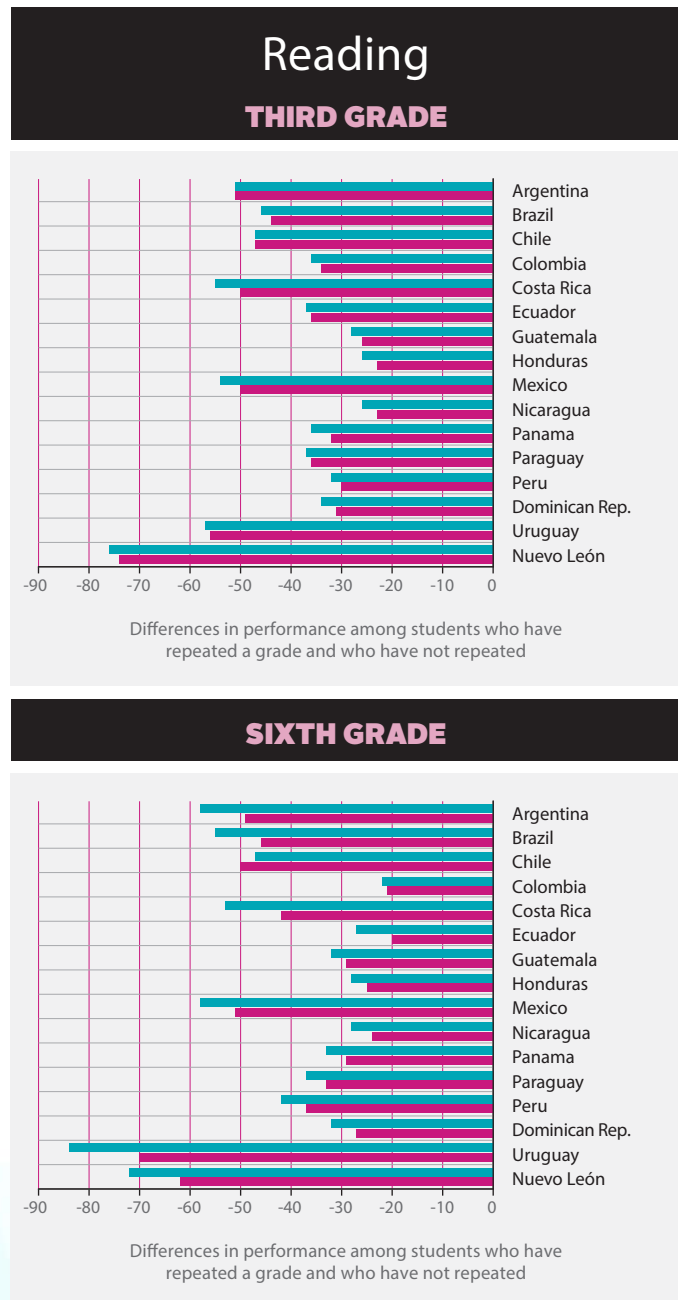
A student who has repeated a grade scores between 15 and 74 points less on academic performance when compared with a student who has never repeated, depending on the grade, subject area, and country<sup>1</sup>, once the influence of socioeconomic status has been considered.

For example, in reading, the difference between students who have repeated a grade and those who have not rises to 36 points in third grade and 29 points in sixth grade. The difference in mathematics is higher, with 37 points in third grade and 33 in sixth grade. In turn, repeating has a correlation of greater magnitude with results in reading in sixth grade in Uruguay (70 points), the Mexican state of Nuevo León (62 points), and Mexico (51 points). In sixth grade the natural sciences exam was also implemented (**see report**).

This information is consistent with the results of the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, **SERCE**, according to which the students who have repeated a grade score 25 points less on all exams, except on the

<sup>1</sup> All of the test scores were standardised at a mean of 700 points and a standard deviation of 100 points. For example, a difference of 50 points in the performance of the exam is equal to a difference of half of the standard deviation.

**Graph 2: Differences in performance among students who have repeated a grade and who have not repeated. This score was represented by area and grade.**



● Before accounting for socio-economic status      ● After accounting for socio-economic status



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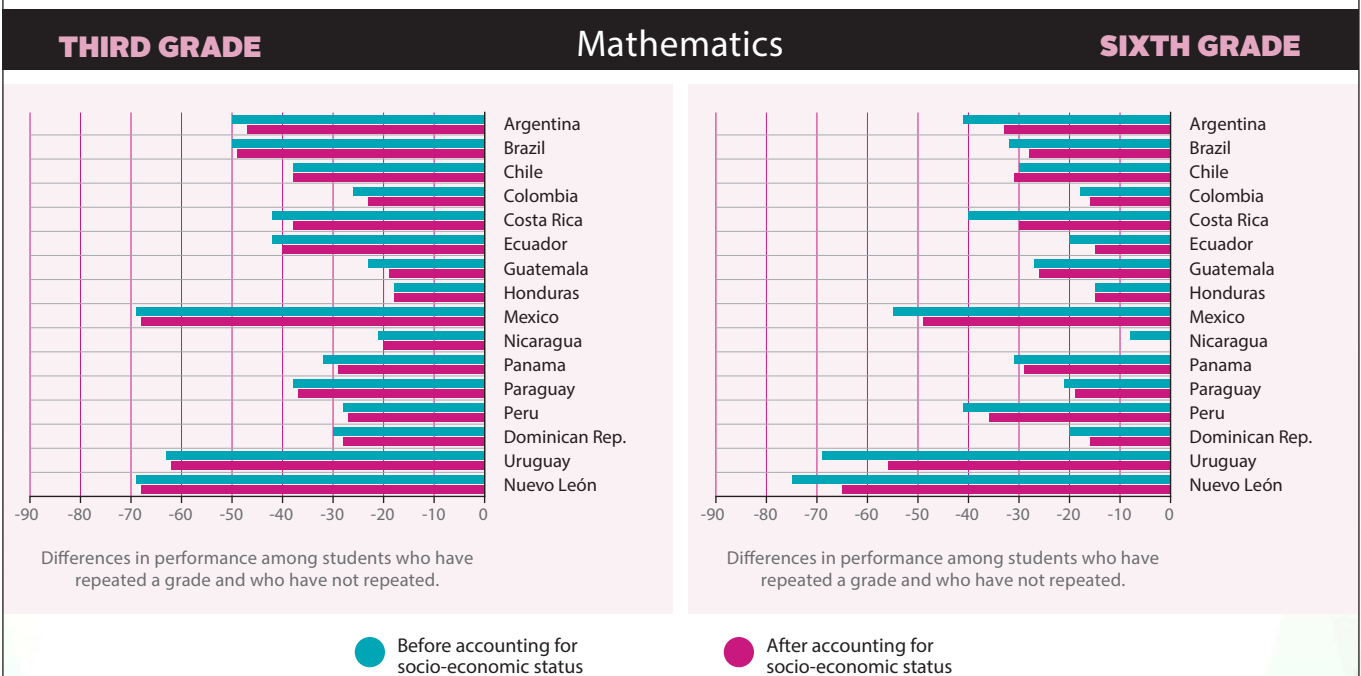
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sciences exam, where it is shown that the effect of repetition is less than ten points.

Furthermore, the findings of SERCE also show that in practically all of the countries, subject areas, and grades,

repetition is negatively related with learning achievement, even after considering the effects of other variables. Therefore, this finding also puts into question the logic of repeating a grade as a solution for improving learning achievement.

**Graph 3: Differences in performance among students who have repeated a grade and who have not repeated. This score was represented by area and grade.**



**Source:** UNESCO-OREALC, 2015. Treviño et al. Report of Associated Factors. [Link to the excel file](#)

**Note graphs 2 and 3:** The bars indicate the magnitude of the association between academic achievement and repeating a grade, before and after accounting for the socioeconomic level of students and of the schools that they attend. In each country, the difference between the cyan bar and the magenta bar indicates the relationship of the socioeconomic status on repeating a grade and learning achievement. The absence of bars indicates that the correlation was not statistically significant. The significance level was 5%.



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## FAMILY AND SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTATIVE SUPPORT

The characteristics of the students' family environment, as well as the quality of their education, strongly influence the probability of repeating a grade or dropping out of school. Those who live in rural areas or belong to an ethnic minority are those who are at the highest risk of not completing primary education (PREAL, 2007). Thus, the reduction of social inequality is crucial for optimally taking advantage of the education process. Indeed, in the region, social segregation by income level, by geographic region or being of indigenous descent is replicated in the schools (ECLAC, 2007).

It is possible that repeating a grade involves problems with stigmatisation, motivation, and the classroom environment that hinder performance of the students who have repeated a grade. At the same time, the children who present delays in learning are faced with their own difficulties as well as discrimination from the education system, because there seem to be only few teachers who have the skills to support the specific needs of these children to help them get better use of the educational system. The psycho-pedagogical support of these students is essential for them to be able to integrate and take advantage of education. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the teaching profession for it to receive and include those students who have special educational needs in the regular classrooms.

Given the characteristics of repeating a grade, it is imperative to search for preventative formulas to avoid situations where students lag behind and, therefore, to leave repetition as a last resource to be applied only in exceptional situations. This suggests the need for policies that provide comprehensive support to families and, in particular, to the children who present learning difficulties, in such a way that they can confront the problems that cause them to repeat a grade.

In this regard, it is recommended to design and test out programs and instruments of academic support for students who are falling behind, which should include:

- ▶ **Focusing on specific subject areas.**
- ▶ **Supporting schools and teachers.**
- ▶ **Defining timeframes for reaching their goals.**
- ▶ **Establishing on-going assessment systems of students, of materials, and of the implementation of the way for establishing remedial strategies based on evidence.**

**Coming in our next edition: Use of ICTs**



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**Bibliographical references for TERCE in sight No.1**

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**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.*