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**Education Development Policy in Peru, Access to Education Based on Socioeconomic Positions**

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**Introduction and Methodology**

Whenever development is discussed, there are a few fundamental areas that are included, one of which is education. Education is an interesting development indicator, because it not only applies to social development, but economic development as well. Education, and access to it, is a social developmental tool that leads to economic success. However, in many developing countries, we often see uneven development in education. The goal of this paper is not to critique the Peruvian education system on its rigor, techniques, or impact. However, this paper will explore whether or not the Peruvian education system is functioning in a holistic developmental capacity, or in an uneven one, specifically in terms of access to education[[1]](#footnote-1). In order to ascertain levels of access, we will be looking at attendance rates and dropout rates in various socioeconomic groups to see where gaps occur. After gaps have been defined, we will be looking at commonplace Peruvian practice, both social and political, and suggest solutions to these access gaps.

**Education Policy**

Peruvian schools are structured in three different segments: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. A student who completes all three segments will have been enrolled for a total of 11 years, starting at age six[[2]](#footnote-2). Primary school lasts a total of six years, lower secondary a total of three, and upper secondary a total of two (EPDC 2014). School is only compulsory in Peru until the age of 16 (State 2015), however truancy is difficult to enforce (Library of Congress 2015). The school year runs from April to December.

Peru has an impressive amount of primary schools. In 1998 over 27,000 primary schools were operating in Peru (Library of Congress 2015). This includes many village schools with merely one practicing educator. The large amount of schools, bolstered by small schools in rural villages, is part of a consorted effort to educate native populations that have historically been discriminated against, and, without Spanish skills will maintain a subservient social position. However, such schools are also responsible for the vandalism of Native culture and the Peruvinization of native children who attend these village schools (Library of Congress 2015). Similar to primary schools, there are a considerable number of secondary schools in Peru, however, most of the best secondary schools are concentrated in Lima, Peru and other regional capital cities[[3]](#footnote-3) (Library of Congress 2015).

School curriculum is guided by the Ministry of Education in Lima. The job of this ministry is to determine textbooks, curriculum, goals, and values to be taught in the Peruvian school system. This oversight includes the creation of course syllabi that is to be used universally by subject (State 2015). Hence, the Peruvian school system is highly centralized and under federal state regulation, with little autonomy for schools and educators.

**Access to Education Gap Analysis**

We will first compare education statistics from rural Peru and urban Peru. In 1997 only 63% of rural primary school aged students were indeed attending school, compared to 73% in urban Peru. However, this disparity was closed in 2000, when 91% of rural primary aged students were indeed attending primary schools while 92% of urban primary aged students were attending primary schools. Rural primary attendance subsequently surpassed urban primary attendance in 2008, with rural attendance at 86% compared to 77% urban attendance (EPDC 2015). The following chart shows rural vs. urban primary attendance between 1997-2008.

As for secondary school, in 1997 only 37% of rural secondary school aged students were attending school compared to 69% of urban students, a large disparity. This gap was not closed in the same way that the primary education attendance gap was. In 2000 only 43% of secondary education aged students were attending school in rural areas while 73% of urban secondary education aged students were attending schools. Not only did the urban attendance rate continue to significantly surpass the rural secondary education rate, it also saw a net increase of 30% in a three year period while rural students only saw a net increase of 6% in the same time frame. By 2008, however, this gap has become somewhat more narrow with 62% of rural secondary students attending and 72% of urban secondary students attending (EPDC 2015). The following chart shows rural vs. urban secondary attendance between 1997-2008.

Although the aforementioned attendance disparities in primary education between rural and urban populations seem to have lessened, even to the point of rural primary schools having a higher primary attendance rate than urban schools in 2008, there is still something misleading about this gap’s closure. There has *not* been similar progress in terms of dropouts in primary education when comparing rural and urban communities, which means that although those enrolled in school are now attending at greater rates in rural communities, those who choose to leave the school system altogether have not seen progress. Between 2004-2008 the rural primary education dropout rate had stayed between 2-3.8%, while the urban primary dropout rate has stayed between 0.5-1.7% of students (EPDC 2015). The following chart compares primary school aged dropout rates between urban and rural populations.

This drop out rate disparity is even worse in secondary education. Between 2004-2008 the secondary education dropout rate stayed between 5.5-6% of students, while the urban dropout rate stayed between 2-3.4% of students (EPDC 2015). Not only is the dropout gap maintained in secondary education, but it is exacerbated. The following chart compares secondary school aged dropout rates between urban and rural populations.

Another common gap in cases of uneven access to education is a gender gap. However, uneven access to education in terms of gender does not seem to be an issue in Peru. For example, net attendance rates in primary school when comparing males and females between 2005-2008 stayed within 2% of each other as demonstrated by the chart below (EPDC 2015).

In terms of net attendance rates for males vs. females in secondary education, the gap is not as tight, however, at any given time between 2005-2008 the gap between males and females attending secondary school was small, as shown in the following chart (EPDC 2015).

We also see no significant difference in primary education dropout rates between males and females. Between the years of 1999-2011 both males and females had similar drop out rates in terms of primary education, shown in the following chart (EPDC 2015).

This trend is repeated in secondary education, where the difference in dropout rates between males and females stayed within one percentage point between the years of 1999-2010, which is demonstrated in the chart below (EPDC 2015).

The next group to investigate would be economic classes. Often education has certain economic requirements, especially when it comes to enrollment. Because of this, development in education can be uneven and swayed towards wealthier classes. For the purpose of this paper, economic class has been divided into five quintiles.

In terms of attendance to primary schools, there was no significant gap between lower and upper classes. All of the classes stayed within a few percentage points of each other, and saw decreases in attendance at the same time. Furthermore, there seem to be no clear upper class bias. In fact, the upper class fell below lower classes in attendance, which is demonstrated in the following chart (EPDC 2015).

This trend was, unfortunately, not the same in terms of attendance to secondary education schools when comparing lower and upper classes. Between 2005-2008 there was significantly lower attendance in the two lowest classes compared to the two highest classes, with the middle class occupying a middle ground in attendance to secondary schools. This is demonstrated in the chart below (EPDC 2015).

**Summary of Data Analysis**

From the aforementioned data, we can see some groups have serious gaps in terms of their access to education. Disparities includes attendance to secondary education in rural communities, rural dropout rates, and secondary attendance for the first an second quintiles. We can also determine no serious gaps exists based on gender, economic income in primary education, or urban vs. rural primary education.

Now that we have determined three major areas where there are disparities in access to education, we must explore what social or political aspects of Peruvian society are causing these disparities and offer corresponding solutions.

**Compulsory Education Enforcement**

One issue that must be addressed is enforcement of compulsory education. As stated earlier, in the Library of Congress file on Peru, it is noted that enforcement of compulsory education in Peru is poor. This is why we see such high dropout rates in rural Peruvian primary schools, with students far below the compulsory statue of 16. One reason families in rural areas may allow their primary school aged children to dropout of school is to contribute to the economic income of the family by participating in child labor. In fact, child labor and rural poverty are correlated together. For example, as wages and income decreases, child labor increases and schooling decreases (Ersado 2003). According to UNICEF 61% of rural children between the ages of 5-14 will participate in child labor compared with 18% of urban children between the ages of 5-14.

Most of this child labor occurs in the rural agricultural sector, which is used both for profit and sustenance (Lieten 2009). Child labor is often attractive in the agricultural field because this industry is dependent on the number of bodies performing the labor. In addition to the economic benefit of children working in agriculture, there is a cultural implication. It has been cited that traditional indigenous populations in the Andes think of children who help in the fields as morally good for doing such labor (Lieten 2009). This is where we see a very difficult conflict between traditional and culturally valuable beliefs and practices and modern values, in this case, a universal human right.

This issue of child labor, which is a major contributing factor to the higher primary dropout rates in rural schools, is somewhat difficult to answer. First, enforcing strict child labor laws may indeed end children’s participation in the workforce in rural Peru, but it will have a major negative economic impact on families who are relying on the participation of their children in the workforce (Ersado 2003). Thus, there must be some sort of plan on how to sustain rural families economically while forcing them to lose income deriving from child labor.

In order to do this, the Peruvian government should ensure that food and housing assistance is available to rural families, and that they are protecting rural worker’s incomes with a reasonable minimum wage, so that employers are not taking advantage of adult labor. In addition to these safety nets, the government should provide investment that will employ rural people, as most rural people can only work in agriculture (Lieten 2009). This can be done by implementing infrastructure development projects, expanding rural police forces, and attracting businesses to rural communities. After such safety nets and economic incentives have been implemented, both local and federal officials should enforce the compulsory school age statute by issuing penalties for truancy and charging parents that force their children to participate in child labor. However, only after a safety net and economic opportunities have been put in place to make child labor unnecessary or less necessary.

**Rural Poverty**

Another mitigating factor that is causing the disparity in dropout rates and attendance between rural and urban schools is poverty. This is somewhat connected to the child labor problem discussed above. We can see that dropout rates in rural schools spike even higher in secondary aged students, probably because many do not attend after the age of 16. This is probably because although some families may not need to force their young children out of school in order to earn income, some may not be able to continue paying for school related expenses or wait any longer for their child to become a producer (Lieten 2009). This is causing more issues in rural Peru, because there is a lack of economic opportunity for adults. To be sure, poverty in rural Peru has decreased dramatically in the early 21st century and is trending down (Rural Poverty 2015).The government aims to decrease poverty in rural Peru by increasing competitiveness among agribusinesses, investment of natural resources[[4]](#footnote-4), and integration of small farmers into the market economy (Rural Poverty 2015).

However, even with a major increase in economic opportunity in the early 21st century, more than half of rural Peruvians still live below the poverty line compared to 30% in urban Peru. This means that there is an unfair disadvantage to those living in rural areas, as they will more often require extra labor, thus creating a higher dropout and lower attendance rate in rural Peruvian secondary schools.

There are a few ways that the government can better combat poverty in a way that will encourage families to keep their children enrolled in secondary schools, in addition to the solutions asserted above to combat child labor caused by poverty. One major issue is access to credit. One of the Peruvian government’s goals, stated above, is to integrate rural Peruvians into the market economy. This is often done by approving small loans to start business, in this case mostly agribusiness.

However, there are major issues with rural financing are risk factors which discourage large loans. For example, federal financers will not award enough money for the average rural Peruvian to start up a successful and profitable institution, for fear that they will not be able to repay such a large amount plus interest (Fletschner et al. 2009). There is a core assumption in this loan process that is weakening the impact of federal financing on the creation of rural economic opportunity, and that is the for-profit loan system. For example, the Peruvian federal finance interest rate is 19%, rather high for folks living below the poverty line (Rural Poverty 2015). This high interest rate, combined with avoiding rural folks who are high risk, demonstrates a for-profit goal of the Peruvian loan system. This would be common place for banks or private organizations, but the federal government should adjust their outlook on loans, and make room for losses. Although in the short run, giving low-interest loans to folks who may not repay them seems counterintuitive, the money invested into communities will lead to economic growth and integration into the market economy, a goal of the Peruvian state. This in turn will help mitigate some of the economic woes causing high dropout and low attendance in rural schools.

Another solution that has been asserted to combat poverty in rural Peru is the idea of a community based development project, created by rural people for rural people (Sastre-Merino et. al 2013). To summarize this approach to development, it is based on bottom up sustainable development that is guided by and meant for local peoples (Sastre-Merino et. al 2013). The reason I find this form of development a beneficial alternative to current practices in rural Peru, is that it would only have local community goals in mind, whereas free market development has market goals in mind. Furthermore, such a model would allow local communities to be leaders in resource extraction and agriculture; so that they are running the businesses and keeping the profits in their own communities, not working for someone else to keep those profits in urban areas.

We can see that the current model for combating poverty in Peru, a free market based model, is not functioning and not decreasing poverty in a meaningful way, despite strides made during the early 21st century. Resource and labor output is used to benefit companies, the money is not kept in rural communities. This is why the community based development model should be implemented, as it would allow rural folks to retain more income and target problems most troublesome to them, which will in turn encourage people to maintain their child’s school life, which will decrease the dropout and attendance gap between rural and urban schools.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to answer a very specific question; do members of different socioeconomic groups have equal access to education in Peru? We have found that access is not equal to everyone in Peru, in particular poor rural people who must work to contribute to their family’s economic sustenance.

There are two major problems that need to be addressed in order to meaningfully impact high dropout rates and low attendance rates in rural and poor communities. First, economic opportunity needs to be aggressively supported via non for-profit loans, state welfare, community based development and investment, and local extraction of resources. After this is achieved, compulsory education laws need to be more strictly enforced to ensure that families who should be seeing economic opportunities increasing do not continue to utilize child labor and can encourage their children to pursue an education after the age of 16.

These issues must be addressed before any conversation on school structure, practice, or curriculum occur. There can be no meaningful debate on how to operate schools that are working within an unequal system. Only once access has been leveled out between these different groups of people can we begin the debate on how to tackle numerous issues with Peruvian educational practice and values.

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1. This paper is not exploring literacy rates, test scores, research quality, classroom rigor, etc. because access is the fundamental core to even development. Only when problems with access to education have been solved can we have an appropriate discussion about other topics in education. To be sure, the Peruvian school system is broken and there is much to critique, however, such critiques would be pointless when there already exists gaps in access in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to this, there is pre-school and post-secondary school, which is not part of this paper as it is not part of the compulsory education system in Peru. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is a law that every capital city must have a secondary school. In addition to cities being forced to invest in secondary schools, many of them do not have universities, thus the high schools becomes centers for learning and knowledge (Library of Congress 2015). This unique usage of secondary schools does not occur in rural Peru. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although the extraction of natural resources has been attributed to increasingly positive economic statistics in Peru, often this extraction has been criticized for its impact on local communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)