



Colombia's Education Crisis: Results from a Learning Assessment of Colombian and Venezuelan Children

THE CRISIS

Since 2015, the humanitarian system in Venezuela has been dire. More than 4.5 million Venezuelans¹ have left the country and the factors driving their displacement show no signs of abating. An estimated 1.7 million Venezuelan currently live in Colombia.² About 460,000 of them are school-aged children.³

Over recent decades in numerous and meaningful ways, Colombia has become a powerful example of the possibilities of improved human development and strengthened governance despite significant challenges. Colombia continues to struggle with high levels of poverty and an extraordinary number of internally displaced people. Nevertheless, the country's government and civil society have made tremendous strides in establishing greater stability and social cohesion. Now the country is grappling with an influx of Venezuelans unlike one it has ever experienced before.

Venezuelans have been met with a generous and humane response from the Colombian state, which granted them access to the local education and health care systems. Efforts to integrate Venezuelans into Colombia's public service infrastructure have been aided by the fact that challenges facing refugees elsewhere, including language and cultural barriers, are less of a challenge because Venezuela and Colombia are both Spanish-speaking societies with similar cultures and customs.

But Colombia's efforts to open these doors have not meant that every Venezuelan has walked through them. Assessments are rightly looking at understanding the barriers to education and trying to get an estimate of the number of children out of school (OOS). Like in many emergencies, the international community is doing little to understand children's foundational reading, math and social-emotional skills. Without understanding where these children are in terms of foundational skills, educational programs will not know how to support them, policymakers will not know how to make decisions, donors will not know where to direct funding, and people sounding the alarm on the issue will rely on inadequate data.

THE STUDY

With support from the Tinker Foundation, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted a learning assessment in the city of Cúcuta to better understand these challenges and shine a light on children's needs. This study sought to answer on a set of key questions:

- What are the literacy, numeracy and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills of Venezuelan children in Cúcuta?
- How do these compare to the skills of their Colombian counterparts?
- How do the literacy, numeracy and SEL skills of Colombians and Venezuelans vary by different sub-groups of children by schooling status, age, sex, disability, and socio-economic status?

This brief will discuss several of the key findings from this assessment to illustrate the extent to which schooling, or lack thereof, is impacting children's outcomes in Colombia.

THE CONTEXT

Located along the shared Colombian and Venezuelan border, Cúcuta is a medium-sized city of about 710,000 people. An estimated 93,000 Venezuelans live in Cúcuta, a city that struggles with high levels of unemployment.⁴

Cúcuta and its environs have also long struggled with a high number of OOS children. Earlier this year there were an estimated 22,350 Venezuelan children in Cúcuta and 361,433 across Colombia OOS.⁵ They are now joined by the more than 9 million school-aged children who are OOS indefinitely because of school closures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

This IRC study was the first educational assessment of its kind in the Cúcuta region.



PHOTO: JUAN ARREDONDO/IRC

METHOD

> Participants

For this study, the IRC assessed two different samples: one for students who are currently in school and another for OOS children. These two samples were assembled in a different manner.

The in-school sample was drawn from 29 public schools, which were randomly selected out of the 63 public schools in Cúcuta. For this sample, the assessment examined 1,219 students in grades 1 through 5. Of these students, 788 were Venezuelan and 431 were Colombian. This sample was considered representative of primary school children in Cúcuta but not representative of other Colombian cities.

The OOS sample was comprised of data from a group of 410 OOS Venezuelan children. These children were identified by UNICEF, the Norwegian Refugee Council and Compassion as eligible to receive services given their school status, but the data was collected before they benefited from any program. The sample of OOS children cannot be considered representative of the OOS population because these children were not identified using a method of random selection.

> Instruments and Process of Data Collection

To measure literacy skills, we used the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), which include subtasks for letter identification, familiar words, non-words, oral reading fluency (ORF), and reading comprehension. To measure numeracy skills, we used the Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA), which includes subtasks for numeracy including number discrimination, missing number, addition, subtraction, equations, and word problems. Both the EGMA and the EGRA were developed by RTI International and adapted in Colombia by the Luker Foundation.

Additionally, the IRC used a series of SEL tools including Children's Stories (Dodge et al, 2015) and Choices (Diazgranados & Selman, 2016) meant to evaluate the development of skills including empathy, hostile attribution bias, sadness and anger dysregulation, conflict resolution, aggression, disengagement, problem solving, experiences of victimization and witnesses' attitudes toward bullying-upstanding, by-standing and joining perpetrators. This data was collected by a local firm called Freedom Center using trained enumerators in November 2019.

ANALYTIC STRATEGIES

To identify the literacy, numeracy and SEL skills of these children, we used regression models to estimate average learning scores of Colombians, and the differences observed between them and both in-school and OOS Venezuelan children. Additionally, we estimated the percentage of students with zero scores, below and above grade-level benchmarks. The benchmarks for ORF in EGRA was set according to Colombian standards for each grade, and the benchmarks for other literacy subtasks were set by estimating the mean score obtained by children who were able to answer correctly 80 percent of reading comprehension questions about a grade-level passage. Benchmarks for numeracy subtasks were set at 80 percent answers correct. All data was analyzed by members from IRC's Airbel Impact Lab.

RESULTS

> What We Learned

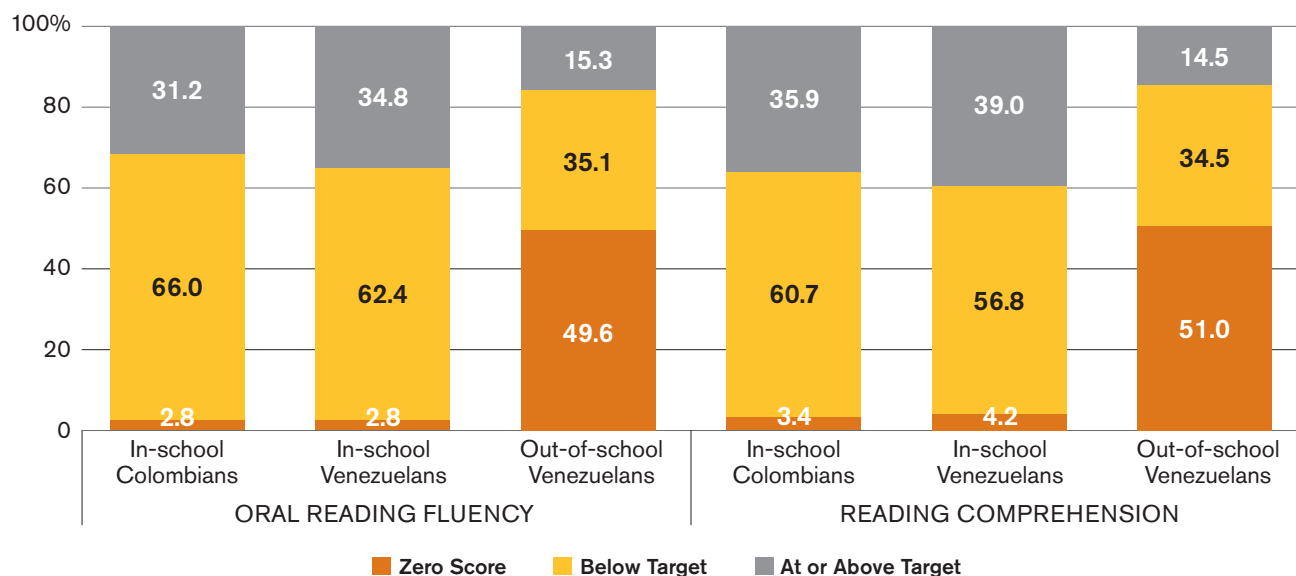
Our evidence shows Venezuelan children in Colombian public schools are struggling to develop key literacy and numeracy skills. However, they are not alone—Colombian students also show that they are struggling to develop these skills. Furthermore, the study highlighted what may be potential negative impacts of schooling on SEL in public schools of Cúcuta, as OOS Venezuelan children show significantly higher levels of SEL skills than the in-school children from both Venezuela and Colombia. OOS Venezuelan children also reported less experience of victimization.

> Academic Outcomes

Both in-school Venezuelan and Colombian students showed medium levels of literacy skills, performing below the benchmark for their grade in all subtasks. There were certain subtasks in which Venezuelan students showed slightly better skills than their Colombian counterparts. When it came to specific literacy subtasks, Colombian students showed stronger familiar word and non-word identification in grades 2 and 4, respectively. In-school Venezuelan children showed stronger skills of oral reading fluency (ORF) for grades 1 and 5 and reading comprehension for grade 1. OOS Venezuelans lagged behind their in-school Colombian and Venezuelan counterparts in all literacy subtasks.

69 percent of in-school Colombians and 65 percent of in-school Venezuelans performed only at or below the benchmark for ORF. Similarly, for reading comprehension, 64 percent of in-school Colombians, 61 percent of in-school Venezuelans and 86 percent of OOS Venezuelans fell below the benchmark.

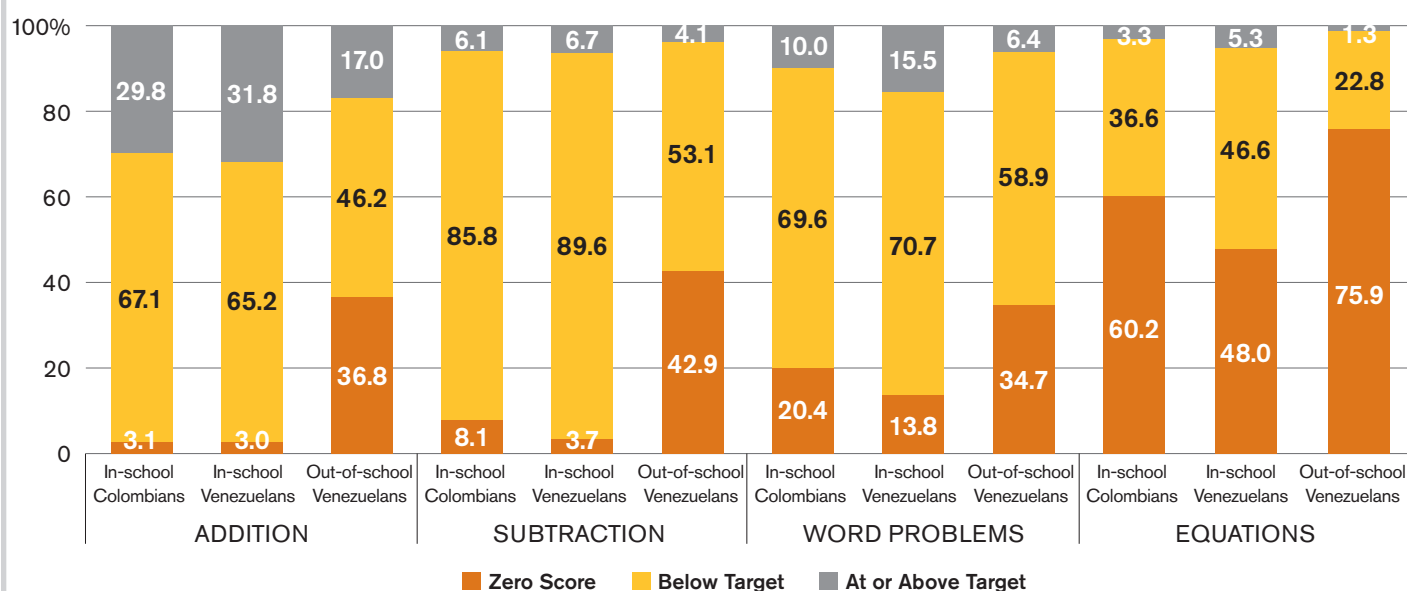
Figure 1. Percentage of children at different levels of performance for ORF and Reading Comprehension by nationality and schooling status



Math skills for both in-school Venezuelan and Colombian students in Cúcuta were alarmingly low. However, Venezuelan students in grades 1 and 5 showed a greater level of skill in this category. Specifically, Venezuelan students in grade 1 performed better than their Colombian counterparts in the missing number, subtraction, and equations subtasks and in grade 5 they performed better in addition, word problems, and equations subtasks. Similar to literacy, OOS Venezuelans lagged behind their in-school peers in all numeracy subtasks.

When it came to solving simple addition problems, 70 percent of in-school Venezuelans and 68 percent of in-school Colombians performed at or below the 80 percent proficiency level for this subtask, while 83 percent of their OOS Venezuelan counterparts performed below the proficiency level. A much larger proportion of students performed below the proficiency level for subtraction problems, specifically 94 percent of in-school Colombians, 93 percent of in-school Venezuelans and 96 percent of OOS Venezuelans.

Figure 2. Percentage of children at different levels of math performance for addition, subtraction, word problems and equations, by nationality and schooling status



Literacy and numeracy skills of both in-school Colombians and Venezuelans in Cúcuta were below the benchmark and those of OOS Venezuelan children lagged even more than their in-school counterparts. This was evident across grade levels and evident among OOS children who had once been enrolled in school, demonstrating how crucial attendance and retention are for meaningful educational integration.

> SEL Outcomes

Despite clear academic struggles, OOS Venezuelan children showed greater SEL skills than children who are in school. Specifically, OOS Venezuelan children showed higher levels of empathy and lower levels of hostile attribution bias, sadness and anger intensity than in-school Colombian and Venezuelan children. For example, when asked to imagine a negative situation happening to their peers, 66 percent of Colombian and 63 percent of Venezuelan students showed high levels of empathy. OOS Venezuelan children in Cúcuta performed much better on this score, with 76 percent showing empathy.

Within the sample of in-school children, Venezuelan children exhibited significantly higher SEL skills than their Colombian counterparts, including higher levels of empathy and lower levels of hostile attribution bias, sadness and anger intensity. Colombian students generally showed medium levels of SEL skills.

These disparities come into focus around issues of bullying. OOS Venezuelan children who witnessed bullying were less likely to disengage or to support the bullies by joining them and were more likely to report bullying to an authority figure than in-school Colombian and Venezuelan children. Reported levels of victimization are also illustrative; OOS Venezuelan children experienced significantly lower levels of victimization than Venezuelan students attending school in Cúcuta. This victimization disproportionately impacted children who are young, disabled or who were part of the in-school sample.

These findings suggest that conditions within Cúcuta schools may be inhibiting the development of key SEL skills for those enrolled. It is critical to facilitate access to schooling. But policymakers, funders and implementers must focus on improving the quality, safety and security of learning environments to ensure that alongside foundational academic skills, children gain from school the social-emotional skills necessary to succeed in school and beyond.



PHOTO: ANDRES BRENNER/IRC

EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF COVID

This assessment generated illuminating data about the outcomes achieved by Venezuelan and Colombian children in Cúcuta's public schools throughout the city. However, it was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic upended education for more than a billion children globally.

The immediate challenges now facing Colombian educators are not entirely separable from the factors explored in this assessment. As educators and policymakers navigate the school closure dimension of the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial that they intentionally and effectively develop approaches that help continue the education of children in a manner that accounts for the pitfalls that existed before the pandemic.

A focused and data-informed approach will be essential for those responsible for ensuring children continue learning during the pandemic and return to an improved public education system once this crisis passes. These efforts should focus on three key solutions:

1. Support the literacy, numeracy and SEL skills of Venezuelan and Colombian children in Colombia by employing a range of low, medium and high tech solutions that facilitate remote learning for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Radio programming and digital content both have an important part to play in these efforts. Educational content can be distributed and relayed using these media and help keep students on track academically even if they cannot physically go to school. As part of the current response, 95 percent of schools in Cúcuta distribute all print-based education content with teacher follow-up via WhatsApp. The IRC's new platform Audioclass aims to build on this approach by providing a platform accessible to OOS children both in urban and rural contexts. Currently in design and piloting mode, Audioclass delivers educational content via radios, smart phones, tablets and mobile phones to support learning and print-based supplementary materials to ensure all types of learners are reached.

2. Strengthen educational access and monitor progress towards this goal. The Colombian government laudably maintains an open-door policy for Venezuelans. But this policy cannot achieve its full potential and intent so long as a large contingent of Venezuelan children remain OOS. While insufficient on its own, access is a necessary first step to ensure children are learning. Access should be measured not simply by enrollment, but by attendance. This would help to ensure meaningful data is gathered and shared about the extent to which Venezuelan children are participating in school.
3. Once schools reopen, educators and other relevant officials must be ready to provide the targeted academic and SEL supports that this assessment shows are necessary to improve holistic outcomes for children. Policies and practitioners should seek to establish and maintain safe, predictable and nurturing environments within Colombia's public schools through training and equipping teachers with the means to do so. Through the Ley de Convivencia (2013), schools are required to have co-existence committees made up of teachers, staff and students in public schools to support student wellbeing, safety in schools and integration of migrant students. School systems need tools and support to implement this program and have it make a significant impact in the day to day lives of students and teachers. Approaches that shore up the literacy and numeracy skills of students in Colombia's public schools would benefit both Venezuelan and Colombian students. That work should be complemented by support for developing better SEL skills in these students. This assessment demonstrated significant room for growth there and a great body of evidence from educational contexts across the world shows that effective SEL supports and strengthens the development of other key academic skills. In early 2021, the IRC in coordination with the InterAmerican Development Bank, will be implementing a program which will integrate IDB's Literacy Curriculum and IRC's *Healing Classroom*, a holistic approach to improving learning outcomes and student wellbeing while providing robust teacher training and mentoring in Colombia. In addition, counselors and school leaders will be trained in SEL to promote coexistence and the integration of the Venezuelan population in schools.

CONCLUSION

The unmistakable trend for displaced families is they are increasingly likely to live in established cities and towns and they are tending to stay in their host countries for more protracted periods than in the past. While these changing dynamics come with their own set of complications, they are also fertile ground for the sort of systems-oriented changes that benefit entire societies.

The IRC's assessment of the learning crisis in Cúcuta showed an overstretched school system struggling to instill key academic and SEL skills in the students it serves, including the thousands of Venezuelan students currently living in Cúcuta. At the same time, a push to improve the conditions in which these students are learning so they can feel safer at school and develop the skills they need to thrive as adults would benefit all the students of Cúcuta. Beyond that but along the same lines, an effort to connect OOS children to the school system so they enroll and remain as students is a worthy endeavor that would benefit both Venezuelan and Colombian children.

Since its inception, the IRC has seen and understood the ways that investments in education can improve societies. Cúcuta is the latest example of where the IRC and its partners have endeavored to understand the best ways to ensure this continues for the years and decades ahead.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/venezuela-emergency.html>

² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform/location/7511>

³ <https://en.unesco.org/news/significant-efforts-colombia-ensure-nearly-200000-venezuelan-children-and-youth-have-access>

⁴ <https://migravenezuela.com/web/articulo/migrantes-venezolanos-en-cucuta/1660>

⁵ <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiY2VmN2I3ZDQ0NmMwMy00MGNGNkLWEwNmQ0MTFmOTk2ZTc5NGMxliwidCI6IjMxZmNmYjNmLTlhMGhtNGFiNS1iNzkyLTc0YzkwNjJiOWM4ZSIsImMiOiR9>

⁶ <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/06/education-in-colombia-2>