Across Latin America, indigenous status is well-recognized as an important line of educational stratification. More broadly, since colonial times, indigenous status has been associated with multiple forms of economic deprivation and social exclusion. Yet, surprisingly, few large-scale educational studies in the region have sought to illuminate the role of historically-rooted socioeconomic inequalities in shaping contemporary patterns of educational stratification by indigenous status. Scholars have investigated the relationship between indigenous status and poverty, on the one hand, and between indigenous status and educational outcomes, on the other, but few studies have paid close attention to the role of socioeconomic deprivations in shaping disparities in students’ performance.

Analyzing data from the Tercer Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (TERCE, Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study) for 6th grade students in schools from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, this paper investigates 1) the vulnerability of indigenous and non-indigenous students to socioeconomic deprivations at home and at school (family social and economic resources and school resources and climate) and 2) the relevance of these deprivations for understanding educational performance gaps associated with indigenous status. To address these questions, we analyze math and reading scores by country, using multi-level regression approaches.

Preliminary findings indicate that indigenous students are commonly in households with fewer economic and educational resources. Further, although in most of the countries, indigenous status is associated with lower educational performance, the size of the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students varies tremendously by country and subject. Furthermore, the educational gaps associated with indigenous status disappear after incorporating indicators of socioeconomic deprivation in some countries, while in other countries, this is not the case. While in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru the indigenous status effect persists across models, in Guatemala is non-significant.

These results highlight the challenge of developing equitable educational opportunities in the broader context of extreme socioeconomic inequalities. Given the impact of educational performance on chances of upward mobility, by addressing the role of social and economic exclusions in shaping educational performance gaps associated with indigenous status, this article aims to contribute to broader discussions of education and inequality in Latin America.