

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO SUPPORT OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND YOUTH THROUGH FLEXIBLE EDUCATION MODELS

Case Study of Colombia

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March 2022



Author acknowledgements

We would like to highlight the work of teachers who devote themselves to flexible education models to ensure every child, Colombian or not, has a chance to pursue their dreams by offering an alternative option for their paths. We also thank those teachers, public officials, and professionals in local NGOs and INGOs who shared their knowledge and experiences and who are strongly committed to education in Colombia.

Other acknowledgements

The ACCESS project is a collaboration between a team of researchers at the University of Auckland and the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG). The AEWG is made up of education partners working in accelerated education. The AEWG is part of the Inter Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) with representation from UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, NRC, Plan, IRC, Save the Children, Education Development Centre, ECHO, and War Child Holland. Several of these organisations were represented on a task team specifically set up to support this project. Sincere appreciation is extended to Martha Hewison (chair of the AEWG), Rachel Cooper (UNICEF), Antoine Mioche (UNESCO), Rebecca Pagel (USAID), Pete Simms (Plan), Kathryn Cooper (Save the Children), Rachel Christina (EDC), Jessica Oddy (NORCAP) and Nicolas Herbecq (ECHO) who were members of this task team.

ACCESS has been generously supported by Dubai Cares under the Evidence for Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Fund. Dubai Cares is a UAE-based global philanthropic organization that works towards providing children and youth in developing countries with access to quality education. Since its inception in 2007, the organization has successfully launched education programs reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries. Dubai Cares also plays a key role in helping achieve the UN SDG4 on quality education. To learn more, please visit www.dubaicare.ae. The Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Fund aims to strengthen the evidence base in EiE, by supporting contextually relevant and usable research, and disseminating global public goods. Dubai Cares partnered with INEE in 2017 to design and manage this research fund. To learn more, please visit <https://inee.org/evidence/e-cubed>.

Recommended citation

Restrepo-Sáenz, Ana María and Daniel Agudelo-Navarro. Opportunities and challenges to support out-of-school children and youth through Flexible Education Models: Case Study of Colombia. University of Auckland and Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG), 2022.

This report is the result of Phase 1 of ACCESS in Colombia, developed in partnership between the University of Auckland, the AEWG, and Dubai Cares. The opinions, conclusions, and information contained within are the result of the work of the researchers and authors.

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Abbreviations

AEP	Accelerated Education Programme
AEWG	Accelerated Education Working Group
COALICO	Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia (Coalition against the involvement of children and young people in the armed conflict in Colombia)
CYVMF	Children and youth of Venezuelan migrant families
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (National Administrative Department of Statistics)
FEM	Flexible education model
ICFES	Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (Colombian Institute for the Assessment of Education)
INGO	International nongovernmental organisation
LEE	Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación de la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Education Economics Lab from the Javeriana University)
MoE	Ministry of Education, Colombia
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OOSCY	Out-of-school children and youth
PER	Proyecto de Educación Rural (Rural Education Project)
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019 nearly 258 million children and youth were out of school worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). The majority live in crisis-affected contexts and find themselves out of school because of conflict- or disaster-induced displacement. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase the number of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY), with a projected additional 24 million not returning to school as they reopen (UNESCO, 2020b). Global school closures have made children fall behind their age-appropriate grade more than ever before. While the duration of school closures varies greatly, as of January 2022, schools worldwide had been fully or partially closed for an average of 38 weeks—more than the equivalent of a full academic year. In some countries, including Uganda and Colombia, schools have been fully or partially closed for nearly 2 school years (UNESCO, n.d.). Due to these sweeping school closures, many children will be prevented from returning to formal education due to being overage, and many more will not return due to the need to generate income, increased household and childcare responsibilities, early marriage and childbearing, and other reasons.

Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) are an alternative education option to help overage, OOSCY complete primary education (and in some cases junior secondary school) and transition back into formal education, into technical/vocational training, or into livelihoods opportunities. AEPs provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity. AEPs reduce the number of years in a learning cycle, and allow students to complete a certified, equivalent level of education in a shortened time frame (Accelerated Education Working Group [AEWG], 2017).

In 2020, the AEWG¹ conducted a review of the existing evidence base on AEPs. A key finding of the evidence review was that while there is substantial evidence of the effectiveness of AEPs to increase access to education by overage OOSCY, as well as some evidence of how AEPs improve learning outcomes, completion, and transition, AEPs are not yet fully institutionalised and supported within a wider suite of nonformal education opportunities for OOSCY in many contexts.

Under the Accelerating Change for Children's and Youths' Education through Systems Strengthening (ACCESS) research project—led by the University of Auckland in partnership with the AEWG and funded by Dubai Cares under E-Cubed—this report presents findings from the first phase of research in Colombia. Key questions this phase of the research sought to explore are:

¹ The AEWG is an interagency working group made up of partners funding and implementing accelerated education programmes globally. The AEWG is currently led by UNHCR with representation from UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, DG-ECHO, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Plan, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children, Education Development Center (EDC), and War Child Holland. Its overarching goal is to strengthen the quality of AEPs through a more harmonised, standardised approach.

1. To what extent does political commitment, capacity and will for institutionalising and integrating alternative and/or nonformal education (NFE) interventions such as AEPs exist within the national education system at present?
2. Where are there current levers and opportunities for the AEWG to lead and/or support systematic change which would better promote increased access to AEPs for learners who need it?

In Section 2 of this report, we specify the methodology used in this first phase of the research. In Section 3, we identify the distinct groups of OOSCY in the country and assess the reasons they are out of school; and in Section 4, we examine the current range of learning opportunities available to these out-of-school learners—including alternative, nonformal and informal learning opportunities provided by state and nonstate actors. In doing so, we locate where AEPs fit into the current nonformal education landscape, and briefly trace their development and growth in the country to date. Further, we map out the key stakeholders involved at present in funding, operating, overseeing, and legislating these programmes. In Section 5, we assess the extent to which flexible education models (FEMs) that operate at present in Colombia support the objective of education for all children and youth. We use Tomaševski's 4As framework (Tomaševski, 2001) which assesses the degree to which education provision is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to particular groups of learners. This framework helps us to understand if FEMs are meeting the needs/demand of OOSCY. In Section 6, we explore why and how FEMs may/may not be available, acceptable, adaptable and/or accessible to OOSCY as they could or should be. Within this analysis, we situate FEMs in the wider political economy of education of Colombia and explore how they are constrained (positively and negatively) by the ways in which resourcing and decision making around the needs of OOSCY are carried out, as well as the level of political ownership and will which exists to both recognise particular groups of OOSCY and ensure the education which is provided to them effectively meets their right to a quality education. The last section of the report—Section 7—summarises the implications of these findings regarding opportunities and challenges in the AEWG engaging with national educational stakeholders to advance policy reform for over-aged out of school learners.

SECTION 2

METHODOLOGY



To explore the two main questions in this first phase of the research, an applied political economy analysis (PEA) was conducted. Political economy approaches provide a way of situating educational interventions and programmes, such as AEPs, within the wider political, social and economic systems in which they exist (Robertson & Dale, 2015). More critical applications of PEA also emphasise the power relations and competing interests of key actors, organisations and institutions in either maintaining or disrupting the status quo in relation to OOSCY and the causes and consequences of them remaining out of school (Novelli et al., 2014). A light-touch problem-driven framework to PEA (Harris, 2013) coupled with a power-based analysis (Acosta & Pettit, 2013) was used to explore and analyse over four successive and iterative waves of data collection:

- a. The various categories of OOSCY in the country, why they are out of school, and the degree to which they are accounted for, recognised and their needs met within existing education policies and programming at present (and why/why not);

- b. The prevalence and existence of AEPs or AEP-like programmes for OOSCY, how this has evolved over time, and how such programmes are governed, regulated, funded and provisioned for within the wider national education systems (including an identification of key stakeholders and their interests within these functions);
- c. The degree to which such programmes are meeting the desired needs and ambitions of various groups of OOSCY, and why that might be.

True to the problem-driven framework, the focus on OOSCY is shaped by the premise that AEPs are one solution to addressing this chronic global concern. A problem-driven framework helps us to see the issues and challenges facing AEPs and AEP-like programmes beyond technical implementation issues and helps to situate them within systems which may currently work against the programme ambitions. By foregrounding these issues, the aim is to then identify entry points to shift the institutional or regulatory frameworks governing OOSCY, or the motivations and power relationships of key actors involved in thwarting change at present.

2.1 Specific Scope and Focus of Research

Within the parameters noted above, the scope and focus of the research was further refined, in terms of both the specific questions/topics explored, as well as the types of programmes, geographical location, and target populations the research focused on. The research was based on four areas each with subsequent questions:

1. **OOSCY characterisation:** What is the current profile of OOSCY in Colombia and what are the reasons they are out of school? Are there gaps between groups such as primary–secondary levels, rural–urban, male–female, among others?
2. **AEP provision:** What current opportunities/pathways exist for OOSCY to access—and stay in—formal education programmes if they so choose? To what extent are AEPs a viable or appropriate solution for specific groups of OOSCY? Who offers those programmes? Are any groups underserved by AEPs? What are the quality learning outcomes for the learners enrolled in AEPs?
3. **Political analysis:** To what extent does political commitment, capacity and will for institutionalising and integrating AEPs into national education systems exist?
4. **AEWG opportunity:** What are current levers and opportunities for the AEWG to engage in policy change in this context?

At a very preliminary stage of the research, some topics started to emerge as playing an important role in the OOSCY situation or the way AEPs are implemented in Colombia, as is the case for the Venezuelan influx, the COVID-19 pandemic, the internal armed conflict, and the decentralised nature of the Colombian government. Consequently, the following questions were added to the scope of the research:

- What are the main barriers for migrant children and youth to access formal education programmes in Colombia?

- What has been the impact of COVID-19's school closures on school drop-out rates?
- What is the relationship between OOSCY and the internal armed conflict present in the country?
- How does the decentralised nature of the education system create constraints or opportunities for effective institutionalisation of AEPs?

It is important to mention that when the AEP provision topic was first reviewed, it was clear that the focus of this research was on FEMs in Colombia, specifically. FEMs are a menu of five primary flexible educational strategies (and many variations of those)—including AEPs that lead to certification, as well as multigrade classrooms, programmes for specific categories of learners, and other educational strategies designed to meet the needs of OOSCY. Education Secretariats, schools, local nongovernmental organisations (NGO), and international nongovernmental organisations (INGO) adapt or develop the appropriate model of FEM to meet the needs of OOSCY in that specific context, and they are implemented within those schools.

Recognising that not all FEMs meet the criteria for AEPs (accelerated, equivalent, certified), and recognising that a wide range of FEMs options are also offered by NGOs and INGOs in Colombia, in this research we focused on the five FEMs whose intellectual rights are the property of the Ministry of Education (MoE), considered the main FEM strategies when considering the scale/scope of implementation, as well as the number of beneficiaries served, and with a focus on condensed curriculum design. Those are: Escuela Nueva, Postprimaria Rural, Secundaria Activa, Aceleración del Aprendizaje, and Caminar en Secundaria (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010a).

2.2 Summary of Data Collected and Reviewed

In order to approach the points previously discussed, two types of data collection were performed: a literature review and key informant interviews. The following tables provide a summary of the documents (Table 1) that were reviewed and the interviews conducted (Table 2). Table 1 shows the number of documents used during the literature review phase by type of content.

Table 1
Number of Documents Reviewed by Type

Document Type	# of documents
Policies, legislation, and ministerial guidelines	11
Frameworks or guides	5
Statistical analysis	3
Context and policy analysis	26
International analysis of the education sector	8
Total	53

Table 2 shows the number of participants by interviewee type and level of the interviewee.

Table 2

Number of Participants by Interviewee Type and Level of the Interviewee²

	National	Subnational	Total
FEM funder	2	2	2 ³
FEM regulator			
National government	1	/	1
Secretariats (local governments)	/	1	1
FEM coordinator			
Government	1	/	1
UN body	/	1	1
FEM implementer			
School	/	2	2
Local NGO/community-based organisation	1	3	4
Academic researcher	1	/	1
Total			13

A full list of documents reviewed and stakeholders interviewed is provided in Annexes 1 and 2.

2.3 Approach to Analysis

At first a revision of the legal framework was done in order to understand the context in which responses to OOSCY were happening in the country. Once this panorama was understood, interviews with government officials and representatives from some of the models were sought together with a continuous revision of research documents, files and programme descriptions. With the key questions in mind, a thematic analysis of the information found was performed and complemented with additional documentation and interviews with teachers and on-the-ground stakeholders.

² Funders may include representatives from multi-lateral funds or bilateral donors, or government entities involved in financing FEMs. Regulators may include government officials developing policy and monitoring AE, as well as coordinating bodies such as UN agencies. Implementers may include representatives of non-governmental organisations, school administration or staff responsible for provision of FEMs.

³ Regarding the FEM funder level, two people who work both on the national and subnational levels were interviewed, therefore the sum is 2 and not 4.

2.4 Limitations

Limitations were found on both the literature review and key informant interview processes.

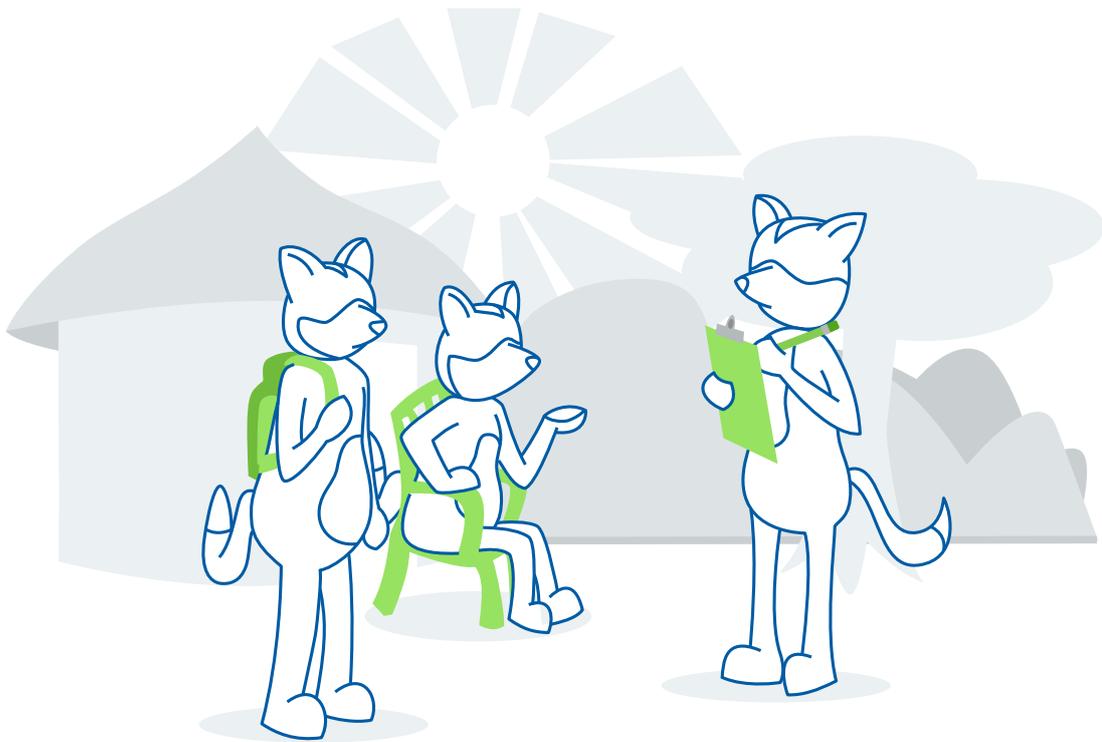
- **Lack of data.** We found no official up-to-date report detailing disaggregated data by urban/rural location, gender, school-age group (primary and lower secondary⁴). In fact, an official number of how many children and youth are out of school on a national level was not found. Given this situation, the profile of OOSCY was built from different documents by diverse authors and dates, signifying a limitation in the understanding of the situation in Colombia. Information was also collected from the key informant interviews; however, individuals didn't have exact numbers beyond their areas of intervention, therefore their reports, as will be evidenced throughout the document, are of a more qualitative nature.
- **Lack of existing programmatic documentation.** As above, beyond what individuals could report from their specific experiences, there is a lack of data on the specifics of the different FEMs: quality measures, impact on student retention, certification rates, among others. The possible explanations for this situation relate to the decentralised nature of the education system in Colombia, as will be later explained, and to the fact that the MoE “does not certify FEMs but issues a technical concept of quality” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022, p. 1) (see Section 4.2.2).
- **Lack of key informants.** Finding academic researchers who study the relation between OOSCY and FEMs, MoE staff who work around the FEM, and FEM coordinators was not an easy task either. The information obtained from the informants was very limited and, as mentioned above, of a very qualitative nature.

As mentioned, when the above gaps were evidenced in the information collected both in the literature review and in the key informants interviews, a formal petition was filed with the MoE to requisition information on 12 topics: the exact number of FEMs in Colombia, enrolment data of those, quality requirements for a FEM to operate, quality assessments of the existing models, OOSCY profile and numbers by gender, urban–rural differences, existing FEM teacher training, among others (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022). As will be seen throughout this report, the response given by the entity wasn't enough either; therefore, this circumstance greatly shaped some of the recommendations given at the end of the document.

⁴There's an evident lack of data on the lower secondary age group as will become evident on Section 3 of this report.

SECTION 3

PROFILE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN COLOMBIA



This section explores the characteristics of the OOSCY population in Colombia, and the barriers they face to being in school. In doing so, focus is given to populations of interest and relevance to AEPs and AEP-like programmes—namely adolescents and youth aged 10 to 18⁵ who either have never entered formal education or have missed significant amounts of their education and are

⁵ The AEWG considers AEPs relevant for over-age OOSCY aged 10 to 18. This is because, in many contexts, children 9 years and younger are not considered over-age and could reenrol in formal education, and because, given their level of cognitive development, an accelerated curriculum may not be appropriate for them. Individuals over 18 years are often included in and more appropriate for adult education. The AEWG recognises, however, that the exact age range for AEPs differs by context.

considered too far overage to enter back into formal education. Our analysis of the out-of-school population is informed by a typology—initially developed by Lewin (2007) and then taken up by UNICEF and UIS (2015)—of the five dimensions of educational exclusion:

- **Group 1:** Preprimary-aged out-of-school children
- **Group 2:** Primary-aged out-of-school children
- **Group 3:** Lower secondary aged out-of-school children
- **Group 4:** Learners at risk of dropping out of primary school
- **Group 5:** Learners at risk of dropping out of lower secondary school

AEPs typically target students in Groups 2 and 3—learners who are already out of school and are of primary or lower secondary age—with the goal of providing a pathway for those who are overage to reenter formal education. UNICEF’s framework (UNICEF & UIS, 2015) for Groups 2 and 3 further delineates those out-of-school children into three subgroups:

- a. Visible out-of-school children:** These are out-of-school children who are typically accounted for in official figures, based on information collected from EMIS systems or other government databases. These are typically students who are school leavers rather than those who have never entered into school at all.
- b. Semi-invisible out-of-school children:** These are either learners who attend school infrequently, or learners who may no longer be attending school but are still counted as enrolled because their drop-out status was never registered; or children who never enrolled in school but for whom information can be obtained from national birth registration records, household IDs or other civil records.
- c. Invisible out-of-school children:** These are children not recorded in any government, administrative or school record, and are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society.

Lastly, it is important to note that UNICEF’s framework acknowledges that, in some contexts, OOSCY may in fact be participating in some form of learning which is not officially recognised or results in a qualification. This includes literacy programmes, life-skills training, nonformal vocational training, rural-development education, religious education, and cultural/traditional education. While they should be counted as OOSCY in official figures, “participation in nonformal education ... is different from no exposure to school at all and should be reported separately when analyzing data on out of school children” (UNICEF & UIS, 2015, p. 15).

Below, we provide a brief profile of the learners in Groups 2 and 3 above and what current provision exists for these learners to reenter or access education. The section is divided into three parts. The first two parts explore general numbers and data related to the subject, the third part explores the reasons behind the data.

3.1 Numbers and Rates of OOSCY in Colombia

There are large numbers of the school-aged population in Colombia who are out of school, but estimates of those numbers are not official.⁶ As will be seen throughout this section, there is not a final count of OOSCY in the country, with data ranging from a possible 34% of early childhood children to high-school-aged youth out of school in Colombia, to 0.94% in primary and 3.34% in lower secondary; there seem to be higher rates of boys being out of school in comparison to girls in primary-aged children⁷; studies are mixed on whether rural or urban settings have higher numbers of out-of-school primary-aged children, although, as will be seen in Section 3.3, vulnerabilities (internal armed conflict, lack of connectivity during the COVID-19 school closure, among others) hit children in rural areas harder; there are higher rates of OOSCY in primary-aged poor children but not enough data to understand the panorama for secondary-level students.

NiñezYa (2018) calculates over 5.2 million OOSCY in Colombia, over 34% of the school-age population between preschool and high-school ages.⁸ This number, as clarified by the authors, was calculated from the 2015 national census: 10,234,521 children and youth were registered as enrolled in early childhood to high-school grades, out of 15,446,381 in the country for that year; therefore, more than 5,211,000 children and youth, approximately one third of the country's under 18-year-olds, were "visibly" out of school for 2015 (NiñezYa, 2018). According to Thomas et al. (2015), using the 2014 UIS database, in 2014 Colombia had the most primary-aged OOSCY of any upper-middle income country: 600,000, and it had the highest rate of out-of-school primary-aged children in its income group: 13.5%. (Notably, Thomas et al., 2015, mention that their estimates are based on an outdated United Nations Population Division estimate because there's no information available for recent years, hence, it is likely that the 13.5% is an overestimate, therefore they recommend a more conservative rate of 9%.) Finally, according to a UIS (n.d.) analysis that has administrative data up until 2019, the rates are low compared to those discussed above, as can be seen in Figures 1 to 3. Interestingly, this source has no 2014 data to compare with Thomas et al.'s (2015) statements.

⁶ There is no official data from the MoE as can be seen in Ministerio Nacional de Colombia (), where, after being asked about the number the entity claims that DANE should be the organisation who officializes the number.

⁷ See Section 4.1 for an explanation on the Colombian formal education system grades, levels, ages and corresponding overage calculations.

⁸ According to Children Change Colombia (n.d.), 1.2 million school-age children are out of school. However, there is no clarity regarding the ages included in the "school-age range" in this source and since the source doesn't include a date for the calculation it is not possible to calculate the percentage this number represents from the school-aged children census that corresponds to the same time-frame.

Figure 1

Rate of Out-of-School Children of Primary Age (UIS, n.d.)

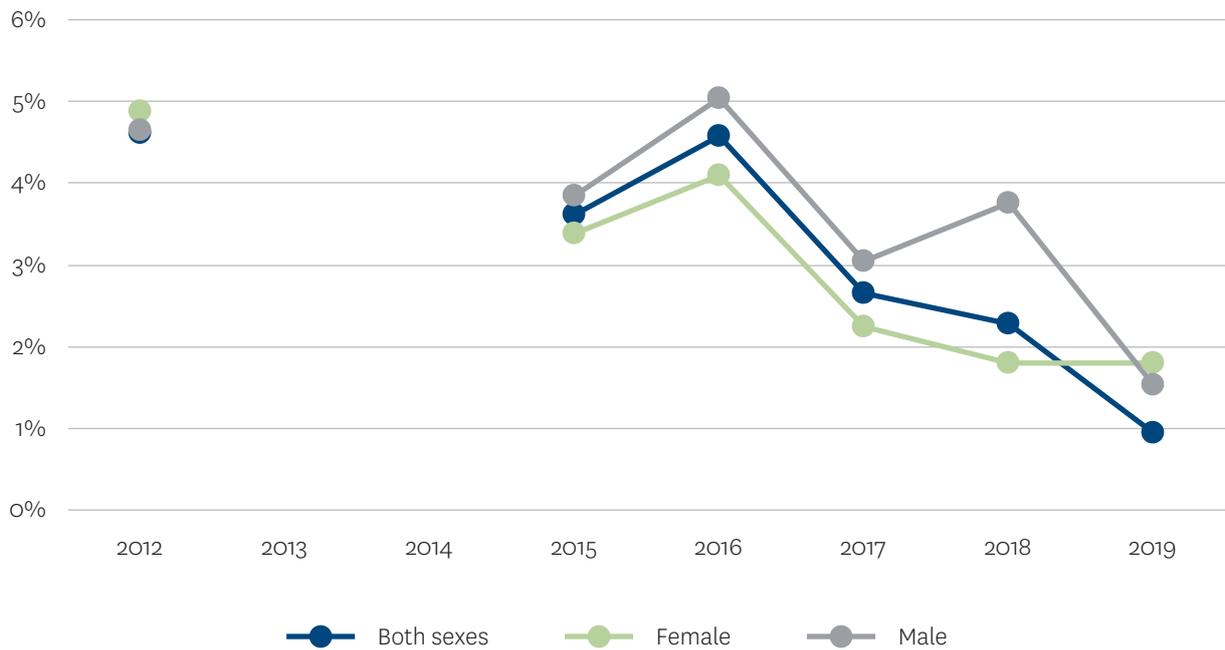


Figure 2

Rate of Out-of-School Children of Lower Secondary Age (UIS, n.d.)

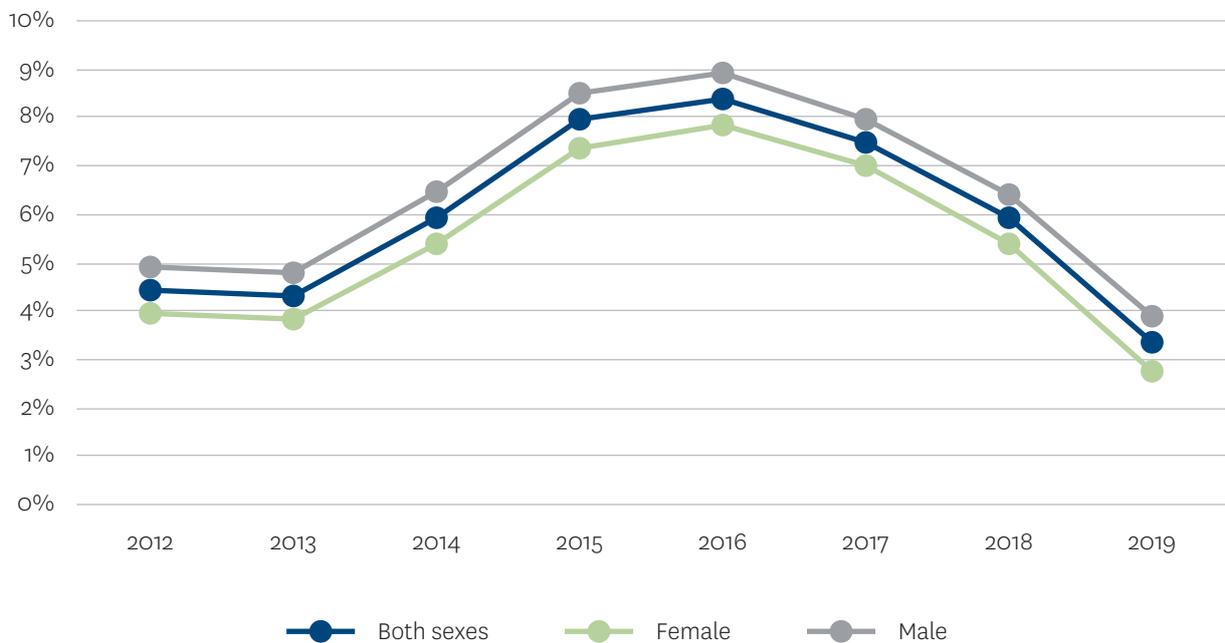
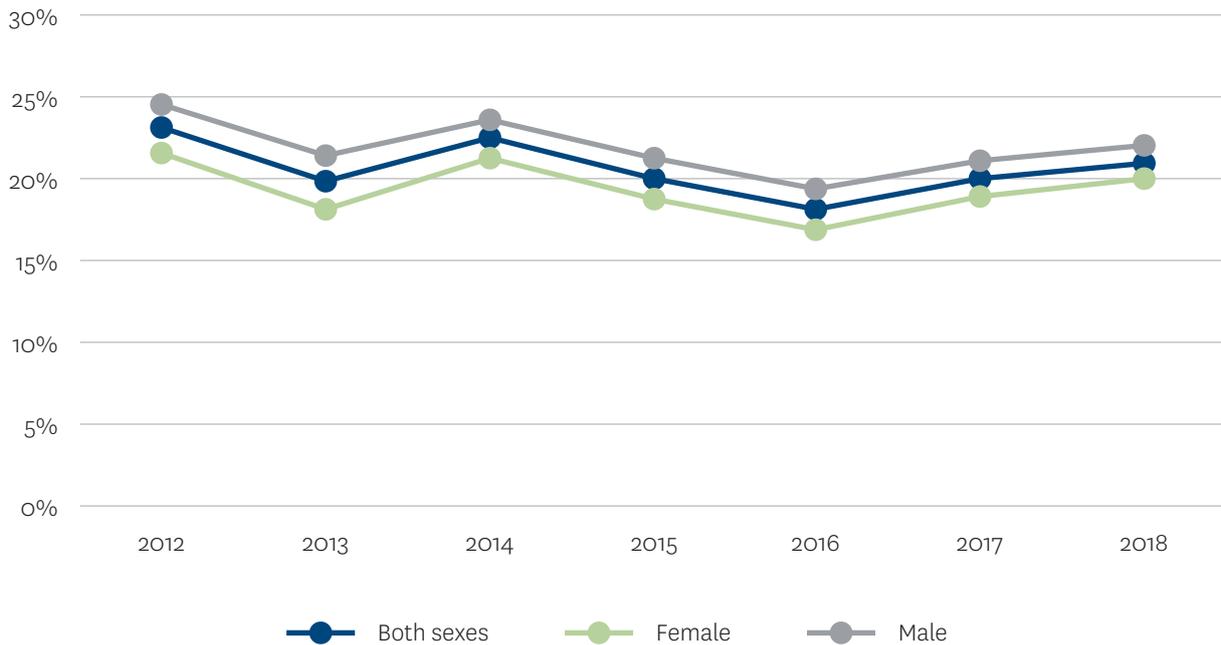


Figure 3

Rate of Out-of-School Youth of Upper Secondary Age (UIS, n.d.)



As can be noted in the graphs above, since 2016 there seems to have been a downward trend in the rate of primary- and lower secondary-school-age children. The rates for upper secondary are evidently higher and rather more stable than the other two segments. This might be due to the fact that the last two grades (10 and 11) are not compulsory, as seen in Section 4.1. According to this UIS (n.d.) analysis, in 2018, which is the last year in which information is available for the three levels, there were 635,516 OOSCY in Colombia (85,973 of primary age, 191,144 of lower secondary ages and 358,579 of upper secondary ages), and, in 2019, only taking into account primary and lower secondary ages, there were 141,266 out-of-school children (35,080 of primary age and 106,186 of lower secondary age). Table 3 summarises estimates from three different sources for OOSCY in Colombia.

Table 3Comparison of OOSCY Calculations by Different Sources, Nonofficial⁹

Estimated number of OOSCY	Percentage of the population out-of-school	Date of estimate	Source of estimate
Group 2: Primary-aged children (ages 6 to 10), according to two sources			
600,000	9%–13.5%	2014	UIS (Thomas et al., 2015)
35,080	0.94%	2019	UIS (n.d.)
Group 3: Lower secondary-aged children (ages 11 to 14)			
106,186	3.34%	2019	UIS (n.d.)
Upper secondary-age children (ages 15 to 17)			
358,579	20.99%	2018	UIS (n.d.)
Groups 1 through 3 combined: Early childhood years to upper secondary-aged children (ages 5 ¹⁰ to 16)			
5.2 million	34%	2015	NiñezYa (2018)

Regarding the “visible out-of-school children” (UIS, 2014), estimates for primary-aged children suggest that for 2014, boys were out of school at a higher rate than girls in the primary grades; children in urban settings were out of school at higher rates than their peers in rural settings; and a greater percentage of children from the poorest population groups were out of school in comparison to the richest group (see Table 4).¹¹

Table 4

Out-of-School Primary-Age Children for 2014 (UIS, 2014)

	Boys	Girls	Urban	Rural	Poorest	Richest
Estimated percentage out-of-school children	8%	7%	8%	7%	9%	6%
Estimated number out-of-school children ¹²	181,600	152,670	249,280	93,450	104,130	37,380

⁹ As discussed, there’s no MoE data on the official OOSCY number in the country.

¹⁰ It is not clear if the source takes into account children from preschool (5 years old) or all early childhood (0–5 years).

¹¹ The UIS (n.d.) has household data up until 2019 for these disaggregations; however, the numbers are not close to the ones presented by UIS (2014): there’s a difference of around 6 percentage points and although the former coincides with the latter on boys and poorest children having higher rates than girls and richer children, the urban–rural trend is the opposite, with rural rates being higher than urban ones.

¹² Estimated numbers out of school are the authors’ own calculations based on the percentage reported out of school and the number of the corresponding population, as provided by UIS (2014). Note that given different data sources, the number of children does not add up to the total in Table 3.

Supporting Table 4, Thomas et al. (2015) reported that there seems to be a slightly higher OOSCY rate for boys than girls in Colombia, as will be explained in Section 3.2, but, in contrast to the table, they calculate that the out-of-school rate is twice as high in rural as in urban areas.

In regard to the school experience of out-of-school primary-aged children in Colombia (see Table 5), UIS (2014) calculated that when comparing the rural–urban gap, the numbers are very close; however, children from urban settings are more likely to never enter school or enter late, while those from rural settings are more likely to have left school (the latter could be confirming those who say rural areas have higher rates of OOSCY). In regard to the gender gap, numbers are also very close, and out-of-school primary boys are more likely to never enter or to leave school (as confirmed by Table 4); however, girls are more likely to enter late. Finally, when comparing the poorest versus the richest population groups, the difference between the percentages is higher, especially when referring to out-of-school children who have left school (7 percentage points higher) for the poorest groups. Regarding out-of-school children who will never enter or will enter late, the difference in percentages between the poorest and richest groups is small but higher for the poorest case in the former and higher for the richest group for the latter, as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5
Out-of-School Primary-Age Children’s School Experience for 2014 (UIS, 2014)

School experience	Rural	Urban	Girls	Boys	Poorest	Richest
Will never enter	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%	0%
Have left school	10%	7%	7%	8%	11%	3%
Will enter late	90%	91%	92%	91%	88%	97%

3.2 Students at Risk of Dropping out

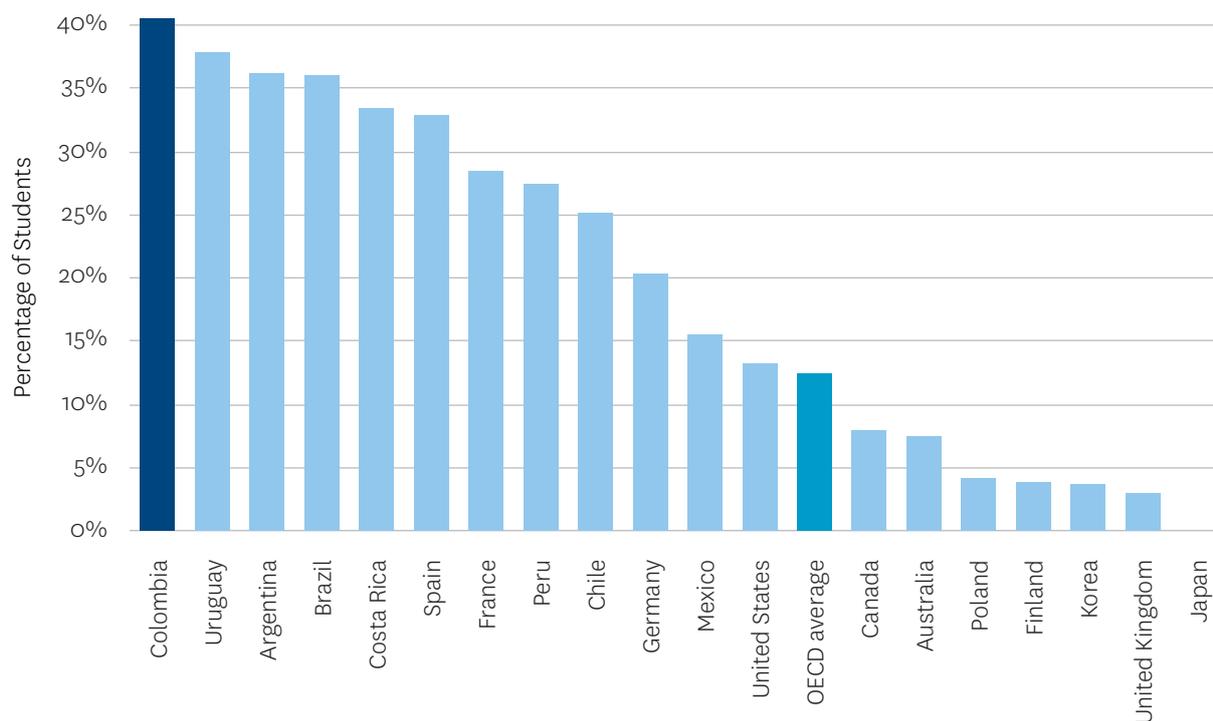
Repetition, grade failing, and being overage are often related to drop-outs and high rates of OOSCY. As will be seen through the section, 1 in 4 primary-aged children were overaged for 2014; the national rates of repetition for 15-year-olds are the highest in the region and among PISA-participant countries; failing numbers in 2019 were highest in Grades 6 to 9 with boys having greater rates than girls; the transition to secondary is a point at which many students drop out, being much higher for rural than urban settings; there is a sharp drop, starting in Grade 6, in the rate of students expected to complete Grade 11.

Grade failing and repetition. Moreover, according to the OECD (2016), 41% of 15-year-olds have repeated at least a year,¹³ making Colombia, as shown in Figure 4, the country with the largest proportion of grade repeaters amongst PISA-participant countries.

¹³ Given the fact that there is no national curriculum, thus, no national assessments that help schools know if students have passed or failed, this process depends on each school. There is a further analysis needed on why such high repetition rates are occurring.

Figure 4

Proportion of Grade Repeaters Amongst PISA-Participating Countries (OECD, 2016)



Failing rates for 2019 were reported at 6.8% by DANE (2021b), with basic-education lower secondary (Grades 6 to 9) having the highest rate: 11.2%. Boys had the highest failing rates in all grades in comparison to girls. In lower secondary, this gap was the greatest (4.2 percentage points) and primary had the smallest (1.9 percentage points). According to Radinger et al. (2018), the rate of students failing has, however, increased: from 2.3% in 2010 to 4.9% in 2016.

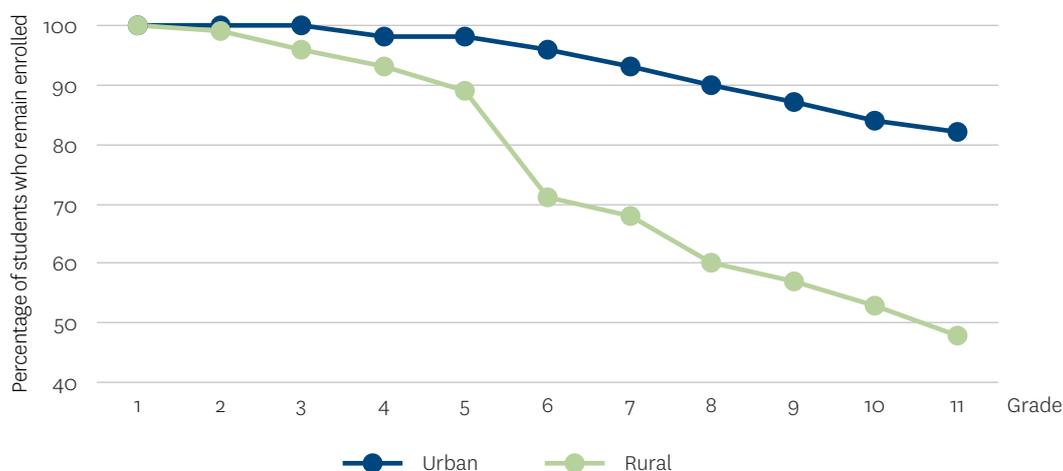
Overage students. According to UNESCO, in September 2014, of the 4 million primary-school-age children in Colombia, more than 1 million were overage for their grade, and thus were at serious risk of dropping out of primary education (UIS, 2014). In Colombia, overage is understood as the discrepancy of 2 or 3 years between the students' age and the expected age at each level (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010b). These children would be part of what was previously described as “semi-invisible out-of-school children.”

Drop-outs. As shown in Figure 5, as a student advances in grades, it becomes more unlikely for them to remain enrolled. This is particularly true for learners in rural areas ¹⁴ (OECD, 2016), and especially during the transition from Grade 5 to Grade 6.

¹⁴ The big drop evidenced between Grades 5 and 6 can be explained, in part, by the fact that in most public schools children need to change school-site and enrol again when reaching lower secondary; in rural settings, sites might be very far from one another. A further analysis is needed to understand if this explains the totality of the phenomenon or if there are any other reasons underlying the situation.

Figure 5

Enrolment Rates for Rural and Urban Settings in Colombia (OECD, 2016)



The above data are consistent with the analysis by Children Change Colombia (n.d.), which mentioned that only 88% of enrolled students stay until Grade 5 and rural children are more likely to drop out than urban children (the average schooling years for rural children is 5.5 years compared to 9.2 in urban settings), as also seen in Table 5. Similarly, as mentioned by UNICEF Colombia (n.d. -a) only 46% of students who enter the system’s first grade make it to the last grade without dropping out or repeating any school year. As mentioned by the OECD (Radinger et al., 2018), and as supported by Figure 5, the transition into lower secondary (Grade 6) is challenging for Colombian students, and there’s a sharp drop in the rate of students expected to complete Grade 11. The cumulative drop-out by the end of lower secondary education (Grade 9) was 29.2% in 2015. According to Radinger et al. (2018), drop-out rates have been decreasing but remain high: 5.8% in 2006 to 3.7% in 2016. As shown in Table 6, in 2016 more boys were dropping out of school than girls, and the gap starts to deepen in lower secondary and broadens in upper secondary (5.87 to 10.85 percentage points), a trend consistent across the different sources previously discussed.

Table 6

Net Enrolment Rates by Gender (%), 2016 (Radinger et al., 2018)¹⁵

	Year 0	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Basic education	Total
Girls	53.13	83.78	74.02	48.34	85.91	85.94
Boys	54.07	83.39	68.15	37.49	85.41	84.88

As also reported by the OECD (Radinger et al., 2018), Colombia reached the universal enrolment for 5–14-year-olds (as defined when the percentage is above 90%), although its percentage is below that of all other OECD countries and countries in the region. However, it is important to note that, as seen in Table 7, enrolment for primary level has been decreasing while lower and upper secondary have increased. According to the source, the MoE states that the rates in primary might reflect an improvement in the reporting rather than an actual reduction.

¹⁵To better understand the levels and grades terminology in the Colombian formal education system refer to Section 4.1.

Table 7

Gross Enrolment Rates (%) (Radinger et al., 2018)

	Year o	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Basic education	Total
2003	88.95	115.64	84.21	60.51	100.61	96.89
2007	90.33	119.19	95.60	70.65	106.84	100.87
2011	88.48	114.52	105.17	80.31	108.16	103.44
2017	84.35	102.09	100.56	80.11	99.69	96.41

Given the situation described—that about 25% primary-aged children are overaged; that there’s an alarming repetition rate for 15-year-olds; that boys and students in rural areas are at higher risk than girls and students from urban areas to fail Grades 6 to 9; and that Grade 6 is the level at which the majority of students drop out—it is important to understand the stories behind those numbers. What are some of the social issues that lead to overage, grade failing and drop-outs? What are some possible reasons for children and youth to be out of school in Colombia?

3.3 Why are Children and Youth Out of School in Colombia? Which are the Situations that Lead to Overage Students?

There are many reasons why children are out of school or drop out in Colombia: violence, insecurity, lack of financial resources, infrastructural issues, and social problems are among the most cited. Below, three big categories will be explored: internal armed conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Venezuelan influx.

Regarding violence and insecurity, invisible borders in neighborhoods controlled by gangs, violence in schools and local communities, crimes related to drug trafficking, recruitment by illegal armed groups, discrimination or bullying in school all lead to absenteeism and drop-out (Children Change Colombia, n.d.; Thomas et al., 2015). The economic burdens, such as those generated by pressure to work or care for younger siblings, costs of books and uniforms, may be an important cause of drop-outs or never enrolling (Children Change Colombia, n.d.); in fact, Thomas et al. (2015) claimed that the major reason for children being out of school is lack of financial resources.

Other situations that have been related to drop-outs are infrastructural issues (long distance and lack of transportation between home and school, and lack of infrastructure like walls, classrooms, bathrooms in schools), social issues (family breakdown, early pregnancy or marriage), and other situations such as stigma surrounding disability and special education needs (Children Change Colombia, n.d.).

Overage has also been related to drop-outs. According to the MoE, in Colombia overage occurs mainly due to late entry to school, grade repetition and drop-out (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010b). Among the factors that trigger overage are forced displacement, violence, the dispersion of the population, the economic situation of the families, child labour and cultural practices of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, Raizales and Rrom (Gypsy) communities and ethnic groups (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010b, p. 9). As mentioned by the MoE,

The overage student who enters or is in the educational system is included in a group in which his peers see him and treat him differently because of his age difference, which results in a decrease in self-confidence and in his learning abilities, often making him drop out and start a life based on the jobs he can get from his physical potential. Students in a situation of overage reflect feelings of frustration, lack of motivation to study, loss of self-confidence and hopelessness regarding their life project. In addition to this, it must be taken into account that the consequences of the overage phenomenon are not only individual, but also represent a social problem because it increases grade repetition, drop-out and the consequent early entry of minors into the labor market. (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010b, pp. 9–10)

As mentioned by a FEM teacher in a northern region in the country (C.10, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher), there's a common belief or perception of education not having a return as valuable as other options which offer money in a shorter time period (child labour, for example). In addition, and recalling that, as seen in the previous subsection, boys are particularly likely to drop out early (Radinger et al., 2018), dropping out might be due to joining illegal groups, migration, engaging in alcohol or drugs, the need to work, a big difficulty in associating education with their plans for the future, among other reasons. Children who are out of school are at higher risk of being sexually exploited, recruited into gangs or illegal armed groups, and becoming victims of child labour or other forms of abuse, thus, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and poor educational outcomes (Briggs, 2018; Children Change Colombia, n.d.).

3.3.1 OOSCY and the Armed Conflict

Colombia's internal armed conflict has been a major disruption to development since the 1960s, especially in Colombia's rural settings where the lack of presence from the government has been historical. Even though a peace treaty was signed between the national government and one of the main guerrillas (FARC) in 2018, a lot of violent situations still take place and continue to threaten vulnerable populations. Children and schools are affected by these circumstances in numerous ways generating school suspension, absenteeism and disruption of the educational process for indeterminate periods of time. Some sources (Alianza por la Niñez Colombiana, 2018) estimated that in 2018 40% of the children and youth in zones heavily affected by the armed conflict were out of school.

A concrete example that could explain the above is related to attacks. Briggs (2018) mentioned that in 2018 at least 44,800 children and 2,300 teachers were forced to suspend classes after attacks on their schools and teachers in Catatumbo region, resulting in 80 school sites temporarily closed for fear of violence. In that same year, around 30 landmines and explosive remnants had been reported near classrooms, hence 3,459 students were forced to suspend school. Although some of these situations seem temporary, the more time children are out of school the more difficult it is for them to reengage. The quality of their education process has been interrupted, and in very violent and threatened contexts, families are forced to displace to other locations, thus interrupting children's educational trajectory even further.

Oyelere and Wharton (in Thomas et al., 2015) added that there are currently 3 million internally displaced people in Colombia, a situation that signifies a source of disruption to enrolment and retention processes. Children who are internally displaced frequently should be able to access education wherever they go in the national territory because of the strong educational legal framework that seeks to ensure all children have access to education (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994); however, as mentioned, their processes are truncated: the family's new main worry is to find a place to sleep, and resources to buy food, among other basic necessities.

The relationship between Colombia's internal armed conflict and school drop-out has been studied in Colombia (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2017; UNICEF Colombia, 2015), and has been attributed in part to forced recruitment practices. According to Pares (Cano Murillo, 2021), the forced recruitment of children and youth is a practice still in use by several illegal armed groups in Colombia, even after the peace treaty mentioned above. Currently, there are 188 municipalities (18% of the Colombian territory) on alert because of this practice and it is estimated that 80% of the reported cases of forced recruitment take place in the rural areas with children between 8 and 18 years old; 33% of these cases are children younger than 14 years old and 59% (49 cases) are boys; of the total, 20 belong to Indigenous communities and two are part of the Afro-Colombian ethnicity (Cano Murillo, 2021). In May 2020, COALICO (2020) warned that in that year the involvement of children and youth in the armed groups had grown 113% in comparison to 2019, explaining that the phenomenon could be due to the lack of classes and connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic school closure.

3.3.2 OOSCY and COVID-19 Pandemic School Closure

Studies from the World Bank (Ham González et al., 2021) report that, as of February 2021, most children had not attended in-person school since March 2020's closures, a situation that, as mentioned, may result in greater drop-out rates. In fact, a recent policy note (World Bank, 2021) suggested that by December 2020 these school closures could have led to 53,000 to 76,000 students dropping out. The note added that, "estimates by the Ministry of Education [2020] also suggest that the drop-out rate has been higher for pre-primary (1.70 percent) and secondary education (1.77 percent), compared to primary education (1.43 percent)" (World Bank, 2021, p. 41).¹⁶ A local news magazine reported that the Minister of Education had announced that, in 2020, 243,801 students dropped out of school during COVID-19 (Revista Semana, 2021). This could be in part due to the fact that less than half of the students in public schools have Internet access and that 96% of Colombia's municipalities didn't have the resources or coverage to develop online schooling (Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación [LEE], 2020).

In September 2021, DANE (2021b) reported that school absenteeism during 2020 was 16.4%, a notable growth compared to the prepandemic 2.7% absenteeism levels in 2019. In rural areas, the percentage went from 4.8% in 2019 to 30.1% in 2020. According to Prof. Sandra García (in Casas Mogollón & Calle, 2021) the concept of school absenteeism changed drastically during

¹⁶ A possible reason for this could be that children in the preprimary segment were left to the complete care of their caregivers, siblings or neighbours, and for that age group complementary virtual solutions could have been regarded as useless. The secondary education segment could be explained by the economic need of the families to have the older siblings to support the household economy by working.

the pandemic, especially when taking into account a child who was able to attend online classes for more than a year and a half because they had connectivity and devices, compared to others in rural areas where there is no connectivity and where teachers gave out study guides but gave no feedback afterwards. The LEE (2020) suggested that schools who were implementing asynchronous classes, meaning delivering physical guidelines to the students, lost contact with around 60% of their students.

3.3.3 OOSCY and the Venezuelan Influx Crisis

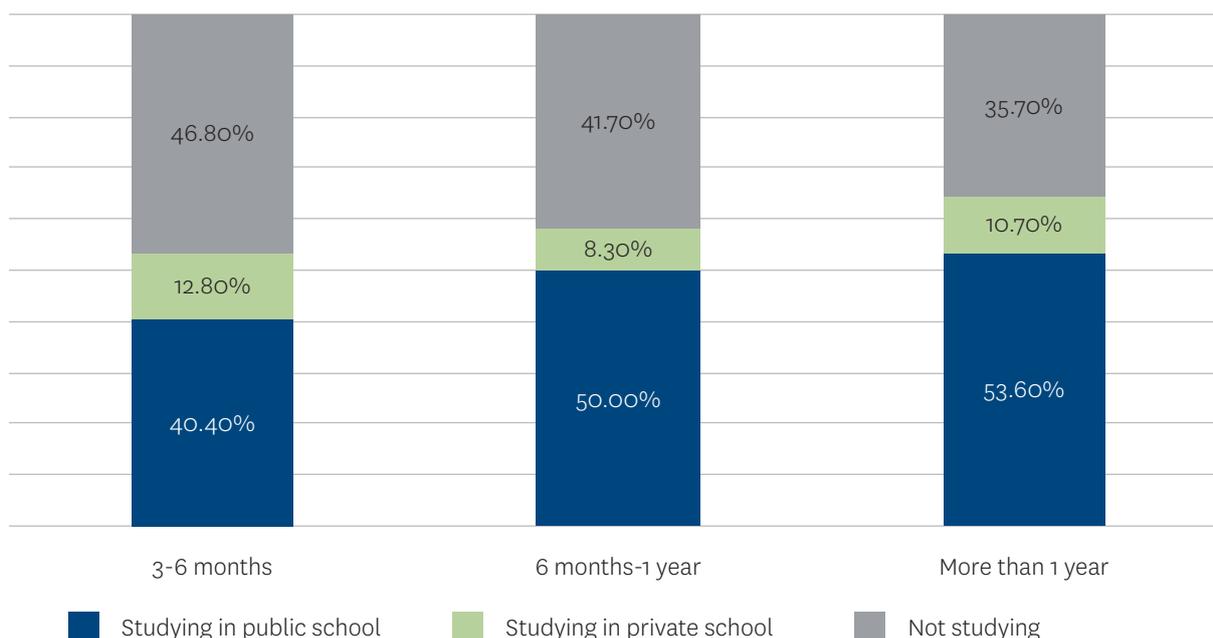
Since 2015, when the Venezuelan influx started, the number of Venezuelan individuals entering Colombia has increased around 3,500%, from 40,000 to around 1,400,000 in 2019, and it is now the country hosting the greatest numbers of individuals from the Venezuelan crisis in the world (Renna, 2020). This is particularly problematic in a context like Colombia, where there are multiple risk factors that are already affecting the national population: between 2016 and 2018 5.1 million Colombian nationals were in need of humanitarian aid due to natural disasters; 409,000 due to armed conflict; 1.8 million due to access, mobility and confinement; and, with the influx, 1 million communities started to ask for aid due to hosting Venezuelan migrants. In fact, Renna (2020) has reported that 57.6% of Colombian municipalities (647 out of 1,122) suffer triple risks related to internally displaced people due to armed conflict, natural disasters, and refugees and migrants. It is important to point to the latter when analysing OOSCY in the country because when the Venezuelan influx reached the country it found an already stressed education system,¹⁷ and, as Renna (2020) mentioned, in situations such as this, the most efficient, effective, sustainable and durable solution begins in offering access to the education provision (see 5.2 Accessibility, below).

Estimates on the total number of children and youth of Venezuelan migrant families (CYVMF) in Colombia at present, and the numbers of those that are out-of-school age, vary. UNESCO (2020a) estimated that of the 460,000 CYVMF under 18 in Colombian territory, around 260,000 remain outside the educational system, similar to Renna's (2020) figure of 250,000, while the International Rescue Committee (2020) cited this figure as 362,433. Irrespective, this amounts to between 50%–66% of the school-aged population. By being out of school, these children lack not only the fulfilment of their right to education, but also school meals, healthcare, etc. Renna (2020) added that two thirds of the CYVMF remain out of school, especially those living in rural areas, and that this number varies according to the time the family has spent in the country as shown in Figure 6, with children being slightly more likely to be in school the longer they have been in the country.

¹⁷ Renna (2020) mentioned that from November 2018 to October 2019, the enrolment grew 506% in Colombia, around 172,000 thousand students. Renna further stated that children and youth of Venezuelan migrant families who are enrolled in schools are present in 31 of the 32 departments of the country.

Figure 6

Access to Education of CYVMF in Colombia, According to the Length of Stay in the Country (Renna, 2020)



Similar to the economic burdens of families explained at the beginning of Section 3.3, for CYVMF, indirect costs such as clothing, food, materials and transportation are part of the reasons why they are out of school in the Colombian territory (UNESCO, 2020a). In addition, some challenges prevent the educational system from addressing the influx emergency: school overcrowding, insufficient infrastructure and educational resources, lack of teachers prepared to attend to the situation, and lack of recognition of educational trajectories due to lack of documentation (Rogan et al., 2020). UNESCO (2020a) pointed out that there are instances of CYVMF attending school as listeners or observers only, because they do not have the required paperwork to formally enrol. This then means that their learning is unrecognised and unaccounted for in the Colombian system, disrupting their future trajectories after high school. According to Renna (2020), this might be the case for the Venezuelan families that cross the border without a national ID, as, even though Colombian schools try to avoid denying access, they are unable to certify their studies without the document because of how the national procedure works. To avoid this situation, the MoE and ICFES released a resolution in 2019 which allowed students to sit the Grade 11 national assessment with a photo ID. By being able to take the exam (Resolución 624 de 2019), they are fulfilling one of the requirements to get a diploma from the Colombian education system.

Regarding overage, Rogan et al. (2020) mentioned that differentiated Venezuelan and Colombian education systems cause students to enter lower grades than the ones in which they were enrolled in Venezuela, hence, a significant number of overaged students are entering the national system.

SECTION 4

LANDSCAPE OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATION MODELS IN COLOMBIA

In this section we briefly outline efforts that have been made to date in Colombia to create FEMs as alternative education pathways for the groups of OOSCY identified in the previous section. This section is broken into two parts. The first is an overview of how FEMs programmes have come about as a solution to the needs of OOSCY in Colombia, and where they are situated in relation to other types of nonformal or alternative education approaches in the country. The second section explores in greater depth the key actors involved at present in the funding, operation, and regulation of FEMs in the country.

4.1 The Evolution of Flexible Education Models in Colombia

The first great challenge of the school education system in Colombia, since its formal beginnings in 1819 and to this day, has been to ensure that all children and adolescents in the country have access to preschool, basic and secondary education (Ríos Beltrán, 2012). Despite the fact that Colombia has been improving in educational coverage indicators, large divides have been generated between urban and rural areas, the latter being the ones that, historically, present the greatest access barriers to formal education and, therefore, lag in educational coverage (Radinger et al., 2018). Inequitable access to education has generated diverse groups of OOSCY, identified in Section 3, namely children and youth affected by violence, migration/displacement, those in rural areas, and those out of school for other reasons such as financial and social constraints.

In the process of facing this challenge, the country's legal framework has been fundamental to guaranteeing the right to education for all children and adolescents regardless of their social background, physical conditions or nationality. In Colombia, it is imperative for the state to guarantee the right to education of populations that, for various reasons, have not been able to access or remain in the educational system, or who are at risk of abandoning it (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994).

The General Law of Education (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994), defines the organisation of the Colombian educational system, that is, both official and private educational institutions, as well as institutions of higher education and preschool, basic and secondary. However, it should be noted that the Law has particular provisions for each of these types of educational institutions, by establishing general rules to regulate the public service of education that fulfils a social function in accordance with the needs and interests of the people, of the family and of the society.

In turn, Ley 115 regulates the education provided by the state, regional and municipal entities, their decentralised agencies, and individuals, establishing that every inhabitant of the country should have equal opportunities of access, transit, and permanence in the educational system.

Under the General Law of Education, formal education is that “offered by approved institutions, organized in a sequence of cycles and progressive curricular standards, and leads to academic titles and degrees” (Radinger et al., 2018, p. 54). This type of education is divided into three levels: preschool, basic (subdivided in primary and lower secondary) and upper secondary education, shown in Table 8. Ley 115 establishes that education will be compulsory between 5 and 15 years of age, comprising at least 1 year of preschool and 9 of primary and secondary education. As a result, in Colombia, it is not mandatory to guarantee Grades 10 and 11 in secondary education; this especially affects adolescents from rural areas, who may not have access to education at this level in their territories, opting instead to leave the educational system and join the labour field. According to the education report for Colombia made by the OECD (Radinger et al., 2018), the average schooling in urban areas is up to Grade 9, while in rural areas the average is up to Grade 6.

Table 8

Structure of the Colombian Education System (Grades marked with an asterisk are compulsory)

Grade	Approximate age	Overage	Level
11	16		Upper secondary
10	15		
9*	14	17	Basic education— Lower secondary
8*	13	16–17	
7*	12	15–17	
6*	11	14–17	
5*	10	13–17	
4*	9	12–17	Basic education— Primary
3*	8	11–17	
2*	7	10–17	
1*	6	9–7	
Transition*	5		Preschool
Kindergarten	4		
Pre-Kindergarten	3		

Considering that the scope of the current research falls under ages 11–20, it is important to clarify that in Colombia upper secondary students can choose between a general or a vocational programme, the former academic related, the latter work related. After completion of basic education, students can also choose TVET (technical and vocational education and training) programmes provided by an entity called SENA. Typically, those students who undergo the general academic programme for Grades 10 and 11 are the ones who might be interested in higher education programmes.

Currently, the educational coverage expansion strategies applied by the MoE include the transfer of public resources to local governments for each student enrolled in their jurisdiction, the contracting of educational services with private organisations, and the development of FEMs (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). The first two seek to encourage educational coverage in all regions by decentralising schools' offerings and administration. FEM is a formal education strategy to respond to the characteristics, conditions and interests of the populations whose right to education has been violated or who, due to social, geographical, personal, economic, cultural, legal, or ethnic factors, among others, are at risk of leaving the educational system or have dropped out of it. In fact, the General Law of Education defined FEMs as a fundamental element in formal education for those children who are part of five distinct populations at risk of exclusion, poverty, inequality and violence, namely students with special needs, students who didn't complete formal education, students who belong to an ethnic minority, students who live in rural areas, and students who require reintegration into society (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994).

Furthermore, UNICEF Colombia (n.d.-b) defined educational trajectories as the journey that each student takes within the educational system, pointing out that it is necessary to protect and build the conditions for children and adolescents to progress on their journey continuously, comprehensively and with quality. Consequently, the purpose of the FEMs is to guarantee the realisation of the right to a quality, pertinent and flexible education for all children and youth between 5 to 17 years old, that promotes complete educational trajectories, in accordance with Article 1 of Law 115 of 1994 (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994).

In that sense, FEMs are a menu of flexible education strategies that can be implemented or adapted to meet the specific needs of the target population through a range of means, including using acceleration, multigrade classrooms, and distance/self-learning, at both the primary and secondary levels. Their pedagogical characteristics are also flexible in curriculum design and assessment strategies, giving teachers orientations and guidelines, but encouraging them to take into account their school context when adapting FEMs.

The MoE, as regulator of the country's educational policy, recommends the implementation of FEMs as one of the means to guarantee the realisation of the right to education of OOSCY. Taking into account the legal framework, Colombia doesn't have a national curriculum, schools have the autonomy to develop their curriculum based on the adaptation of the pedagogical guidelines, provided by the MoE, to their students' needs; it is the schools that are directly called upon to serve the population through curricular flexibility processes (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

History of FEMs in Colombia

FEMs first emerged in Colombia in 1961 as a result of a pilot project, implemented in Latin America, developed with the MoE and sponsored by UNESCO, to increase educational coverage in rural schools. This project generated the creation of the first primary multigrade rural schools in Colombia, where the five primary grades are assigned to one teacher, and the curriculum is condensed to accelerate fundamental learning processes in language and maths that allow students to acquire the basic academic competences to access secondary grades (Ramírez-Giraldo & Téllez-Corredor, 2006). The project aimed to increase educational coverage in rural communities with low population density, being the precursor to begin thinking about more curriculum delivery to attend to diverse OOSCY groups. In 1967, based on the successful

experience of this project, the government published the first legal framework that regulated the conditions in which this model could be applied at a national scale, highlighting the flexibility given to schools for curricular adaptations to implement this model (Decreto 0150 de Enero 31 de 1967).

One of the main challenges during the implementation, at a national level, of primary multigrade rural schools in Colombia was to develop teacher training programmes focused on curricular flexibility and pedagogical resources for students in different grades and academic levels. With the purpose of tackling those issues, the MoE created Escuela Nueva, which is considered the first and most recognised FEM in the country (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010a). In 1990, the legal framework was officially published, including Escuela Nueva as a FEM focused on children between 7 and 12 years enrolled in primary multigrade rural schools, giving teachers pedagogical flexibility to attend to this population considered to be at risk of drop-out (Decreto 1490 de Julio 9 de 1990).

Despite the national growth in educational coverage of primary schools, during the 1990s there was an increasing awareness of drop-out levels in secondary schools, where the rural-urban gap continued to broaden (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). Consequently, the Colombian government, through an alliance with the World Bank, implemented the Rural Education Project (PER), an initiative that sought to offer pedagogic models to serve children and youth between 5 and 17 years old from rural communities (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

The PER gave more autonomy to local governments, schools and private organisations to design FEMs according to the conditions, characteristics, and needs of diverse rural populations. In fact, one objective of the PER, which came as part of the 2018 Peace Agreement with the FARC guerrilla group, was to offer FEMs to preschool, primary and secondary students in rural areas historically affected by the country's armed conflict (Radinger et al., 2018). The implementation of PER at a national scale led a diverse range of FEMs in different regions, with autonomy given to rural schools to focus on the main challenges for their distinct student population. Therefore, the scope of the population became wider, and more attention was given to include children and youth from diverse backgrounds at risk of drop-out, for instance, learners with special education needs, conflict victims and Indigenous and Black communities (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2018a).

As a result of these processes, FEMs such as Caminar en Secundaria,¹⁸ Media Académica Rural¹⁹ and Aceleración del Aprendizaje²⁰ emerged as an alternative to continue the educational trajectory of children and youth who either completed their primary grades with Escuela Nueva or were not included in it before, mostly in rural secondary schools (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). Furthermore, through the following years, all these flexible education strategies began to expand their scope by being adapted and implemented in urban marginal communities with high school drop-out rates.

It has been documented that when FEMs are scaled and reach more OOSCY, along with policies such as the abolition of school fees and conditional cash transfers, education is more affordable for those in disadvantaged families and access is granted to more (OECD, 2016). According to the OECD (2016), the provision of education through FEMs increased the total school-age gross

¹⁸ "Walking in Secondary"

¹⁹ "Rural Academic Middle School"

²⁰ "Learning Acceleration"

enrolment from 57% in 2002 to 76% in 2012. These types of programmes are necessary given that the current capacity of the system is insufficient to accommodate full enrolment (OECD, 2016). In fact, the OECD recommends the improvement of the quality of FEMs in order to support the large number of overage students, drop-outs or those who combine work with study.

4.2 FEMs in the Wider Landscape of Opportunities for OOSCY

Having explored the growth and evolution of FEMs in Colombia, we now focus on current FEM programmes that are functioning in the country. The aim in this section is to explore the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders involved in running, funding, regulating and overseeing FEMs in the country, historically and at present. As part of this, we also explore how this structure might support/hinder opportunities for FEMs to function effectively at present.

4.2.1 Current Scale and Scope of FEM Provision in Colombia

Like the data on enrolment and out-of-school figures, data on the number of children attending FEMs vary by source, but all show an increase in FEMs' student-enrolment rates during the last years. Based on reports from the MoE, in 2020 there were 10,022,656 students enrolled in private and public schools at national level, of which 1,719,062 were attending FEM programmes (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022). The five FEMs whose intellectual rights are the property of the MoE are considered the main FEM strategies when considering the scale/scope of implementation, as well as the number of beneficiaries served, with a focus on condensed curriculum design. These are: Escuela Nueva, Postprimaria Rural, Secundaria Activa, Aceleración del Aprendizaje, and Caminar en Secundaria (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2010a).

Contradicting the MoE data, DANE (2021a) suggested that the official enrolment for FEMs in 2020 was 742,639 students. Among those enrolled in FEMs, 73.7% were enrolled in primary FEM models, while only 21.8% were enrolled in lower and upper secondary options. The same source reported that in 2019, the only programme that showed a decreased enrolment (-3%) was primary-level FEMs. Other education levels increased enrolment in FEMs, suggesting increasing access to FEMs in recent years. The number of learners enrolled in FEM programmes represented nearly 17%²¹ of all formal school-going children and youth. A total of 738,814 FEM students were attending the five main FEMs. The rest, 980,248 children and youth, were attending specialised, unique FEM models, tailored to meet the needs of specific groups of learners, from which there is a lack of information regarding their pedagogical guidelines such as curriculum design, instruction methods, and assessment strategies (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020; UNICEF Colombia, 2020).

Besides the regular formal education and the five FEMs offered by the MoE, organisations such as UNESCO (Renna, 2020) have pointed out that there has been an interesting development of alternative modalities in order to reach OOSCY. It is estimated that the humanitarian actors that

²¹ Because FEMs are part of the formal education system, learners in FEMs are not considered out-of-school. Therefore, the number of OOSCY described in Section 3 are those who are not in either mainstream classrooms or FEMs and are in need of accessing some form of formal education.

are part of the Education Cluster, especially UNICEF, NRC, Save The Children, Plan International and World Vision, are providing emergency educational opportunities through FEMs to almost 7,297 CYVMF (Renna, 2020).

UNICEF, Save the Children, and NRC are some of the entities that are mentioned in connection to initiatives such as Espacios Temporales de Aprendizaje (Save the Children), which combines flexible models to promote literacy skills for 132 children in La Guajira and Arauca; Aulas de Informática (Save the Children), in two schools in the same territories, which promotes digital skills; transition initiatives that serve as bridge programmes to bring children back to school through personalised school support (NRC); Círculos de Aprendizaje (UNICEF, Fundación Escuela Nueva, Opción Legal, Corporación Infancia y Desarrollo, World Vision), which works with migrant populations and host communities to offer personalised tutorials and accompanies children to help them enter formal education systems in five departments of the country.

4.2.2 Implementation, Funding and Regulation of FEMs

Table 9 shows the responsible entities for funding, implementing and regulating FEMs in Colombia.

As shown in the table, the MoE, through its legal framework and public policies, has been fundamental for the development, implementation, funding, and regulation of FEMs. However, the Colombian education system is characterised by a high level of decentralisation. The General Law of Education (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994) highlights the value of school autonomy to adapt FEMs as a strategy to increase the educational coverage for children and youth from diverse vulnerable communities, establishing the main conditions that this type of formal education programmes must complete and defining the roles of other institutions in its implementation.

Table 9

Funding, Implementation, Regulation, Scale and Scope of FEM Provision in Colombia in 2020 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022)

FEM/dates	Funder	Implementer	Regulating/ certifying body	Location/ target population	Population reached	Programme objective
Escuela Nueva 1960s–present	MoE / Fundación Escuela Nueva/ private organisations and NGOs	Fundación Escuela Nueva through public schools in rural and urban areas.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Primary students aged 6 to 12 years old in rural areas at national level.	547,609	Support rural students and overage OOSCY to complete 6 years of primary. Have been adapted to be completed in a short period of time depending on the school’s autonomy. Learners obtain a primary certificate, and continue on into secondary grades either through FEMs or mainstream schools.
Postprimaria Rural 1990s–present	MoE/University of Pamplona/ private organisations and NGOs	Public rural schools and private organisations.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Secondary students aged 12 to 17 years old in rural areas at national level.	137,160	Support rural students and overage OOSCY to complete 4 years of secondary. Have been adapted to be completed in a short period of time depending on the school’s autonomy. Learners obtain a secondary certificate, and continue on into middle grades either through FEMs or mainstream schools.

FEM/dates	Funder	Implementer	Regulating/ certifying body	Location/ target population	Population reached	Programme objective
Secundaria Activa 2012–present	MoE/private organizations and NGOs	Public rural and urban schools and private organisations.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Secondary students aged 11 to 17 years old for urban areas at national level.	1,602	Support urban students and overage OOSCY to complete 4 years of secondary. Have been adapted to be completed in a short period of time depending on the school's autonomy. Learners obtain a secondary certificate, and continue on into middle grades either through FEMs or mainstream schools.
Aceleración del Aprendizaje 1990s–present	MoE/Corpoeducación/private organisations and NGOs	Public rural and urban schools and private organisations.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Overage primary students aged 10 to 17 from rural or marginal urban areas at the national level.	37,784	Support overage OOSCY to complete 6 years of primary. Enable overage students to acquire fundamental learnings in a faster time frame by condensing the curriculum into fundamental competencies around language and maths. Learners obtain a primary certificate, and continue on into middle grades either through FEMs or mainstream schools.

FEM/dates	Funder	Implementer	Regulating/ certifying body	Location/ target population	Population reached	Programme objective
Caminar en Secundaria 1990s–present	MoE/private organisations and NGOs	Public rural schools and private organisations.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Secondary school students from 13 to 17 years old who are overage, from rural areas at national level.	14,659	Support rural overage OOSCY to complete 4 years of secondary education. Enable overage students to acquire fundamental learnings in a faster time frame by condensing the curriculum into fundamental competencies around language, maths, natural and social sciences. Learners obtain a secondary certificate, and continue on into middle grades either through FEMs or mainstream schools.

FEM/dates	Funder	Implementer	Regulating/ certifying body	Location/ target population	Population reached	Programme objective
Private FEMs (39 models) 1990s–present	Schools, private organisations, local NGOs and international NGOs	Schools, private organisations, local NGOs and international NGOs.	MoE/FEM evaluation committees	Primary and secondary students from 6 to 17 years old with educational access barriers at national level. Small-scale implementation and private property rights.	980,248	Schools, private organisations, NGOs and INGOs have the option to define their own pedagogic model based on the Ministry’s orientations and the characteristics of their own contexts. These FEMs are considered specialised, unique programmes that are tailored to meet the needs of specific groups of learners; the literature review showed a lack of information regarding their pedagogical guidelines such as curriculum design, instructions methods, and assessment strategies.
Total					1,719,062	

Implementation

The Colombian education system is divided politically and administratively into 96 certified education secretariats. These are represented by 32 departmental education secretariats and 64 municipal or district education secretariats. The latter represent the majority of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, while the former is in charge of all the municipalities whose secretariats of education are not certified (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022).

Schools and local governments have a high level of autonomy in implementing FEMs. Article 68 of the Political Constitution (Artículo 68, Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991) establishes the freedom for private organisations to establish educational institutions and offer the degrees they consider pertinent (although legal operation permits will depend on the certified education secretariats). Similarly, schools have autonomy to establish their internal norms, as well as evaluation systems, the development of the curricular plan, the forms of school evaluation, and the implementation of FEMs.

Currently, FEM programmes in Colombia are being implemented at a national scale. Initially, FEMs were implemented mostly in rural schools, but recently they are increasing in number in urban contexts (UNICEF Colombia, 2020). Based on successful experiences with Escuela Nueva and PER models, the MoE authorises private organisations, NGOs, INGOs, community associations, and schools to develop FEMs under the legal framework and the Ministry's technical and pedagogical guidance. Successful experiences with rural communities are being adapted for diverse targeted populations, such as students with special needs, migrants, Indigenous and Black communities, among others.

FEM implementers are private organisations, NGOs and INGOs, community associations (e.g., Indigenous or Black communities), and/or public or private schools that, based on their interest to design and implement a FEM, are in charge of the technical, pedagogical and administrative requirements established by the MoE. All the FEMs are implemented in or through a private or public school. In public schools, which most of the FEM students in the country attend, FEM teachers are funded by the MoE, following the same payment conditions and entry requirements as regular teachers (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

This means that, firstly, schools are in charge of supporting the in-field implementation by providing teachers or external tutors. Secondly, either public or private schools are authorised to develop FEM programmes in alliance with private organisations and community associations.

NGOs, such as Fundación Escuela Nueva, support FEMs by providing technical assistance for implementation in areas such as curriculum design, instruction methods, and assessment strategies. Likewise, the MoE provides technical assistance for education secretariats, FEM evaluation committees, and public schools involved in the implementation of FEMs programmes, focusing on the legal framework, technical and pedagogical requirements, and design and implementation of FEM in the territories (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

Funding

Since the approval of FEM programmes as a formal education strategy, included in the legal framework during the 1990s, there has been an increasing involvement of private organisations interested in developing FEM programmes to be offered in diverse vulnerable communities and to be funded by either donors or education secretariats.

The five main FEM programmes being implemented in Colombia are supported by the MoE which is in charge of teachers' salaries, developing pedagogical guidelines for schools and supporting teacher training programmes in alliance with local governments (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022). The other 39 FEM programmes are being implemented by schools, private organisations, NGOs and INGOs on a small scale, seeking to attend to the specific needs of their student population, becoming unique models that need further analysis by the MoE and the other actors involved in FEMs implementation in Colombia to assess their potential to be implemented in other contexts.

Consequently, most of the FEM teachers in Colombia are funded by the MoE and the pedagogic resources and teacher training programmes are funded by either private organisations such as NGOs and INGOs, or local governments through education secretariats' public budgets. Due to its success and free public access, the most implemented FEM in Colombia is, by far, Escuela Nueva, which serves more than 30% of the FEM student enrolment in the country (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). This programme is mostly used in multigrade rural schools at a national scale and implemented by public school teachers. However, the pedagogic resources design and the teacher training is led by private organisation Fundación Escuela Nueva.

The MoE is in charge of financing the FEM evaluation processes and defining the conditions for national budget transfers to the education secretariats. The latter institutions, guided by their local government education policies, decide the public budget to be spent on FEM programmes and lead the hiring processes of private organisations. However, given the fact that most of the FEMs are being implemented in public schools, the teachers' salaries are paid out of the MoE national budget.

Regulation

In terms of FEMs regulation, supervision and monitoring, local and national government and higher education institutions all play a role. The Directorate for Quality Education in the MoE is in charge of supporting all the FEMs processes. This section of the Ministry defines and develops all the policy guidelines around curriculum, standardised exams, pedagogical resources, and teacher training among others, representing one of the biggest directorates in terms of staff and budget (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022). However, the team that is mostly focused on FEMs is one of the smallest, with fewer than 10 people on average on their staff (C.5, regulator, national-level government official).

The MoE does not certify FEM,

but issues a technical concept of quality based on the components and educational resources presented by the proponent. For the purpose of issuing the quality concept, the Referent's Division shares with the proponents the conditions that a model must meet to initiate the process, as well as the elements on which the concept is pronounced. Recommendations are made for the construction of the report that includes the result of the study of the model. (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022, p.1)

In order for the MoE to issue a concept of quality for a FEM, the FEM must meet the following five requirements:

1. Have an implementation period of at least 3 years.
2. Respond to one or more educational levels (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary).
3. Delimit and characterise the population to be served.
4. Cover the fundamental areas contemplated by Law 115 of 1994, in the educational level or levels in which it is developed.
5. Be framed within the national educational quality referents: Curricular guidelines, basic standards of competencies in language, mathematics, natural sciences, social and citizenship sciences, and general and pedagogical orientations of the MoE for the other compulsory and fundamental areas. (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022, p. 3).

The issuance of the concept of quality is generated from the materials submitted by the proponent. "The technical concept of quality of an EFM is a qualitative evaluation that is pronounced on two categories: 1) Internal coherence of the model and 2) Coherence of the model with the educational policies" (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022, p. 4). If the model fulfils the requirements, the technical quality concept is sent to the area in charge of generating a code (SIMAT) which will allow for students to be enrolled in—and served by—the programme. "If a FEM has aspects to be improved in order to strengthen its proposal, the concept is sent to the proponent with observations, comments and proposed adjustments to continue qualifying the model" (p. 5).

The MoE also establishes the evaluation criteria for FEM approval, constitutes the FEM evaluation committees, and guarantees transparency during evaluation processes for FEMs approved. Evaluation committees are composed of higher education institutions, mainly universities, and are in charge of evaluating the FEMs assigned by the MoE, ensuring the correct implementation of the evaluation criteria, transparency and objectivity. The evaluation committees report the results of the FEMs evaluation processes to the MoE, including all the information regarding the evaluation criteria and conditions (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

Finally, the education secretariats organise information about the FEMs capable of providing these educational programmes for OOSCY in their jurisdiction. They also evaluate the necessity of contracting private organisations (for profit entities or civil society organisations) to ensure FEMs are provided to target populations at risk of drop-out, and they report to the MoE, in the established terms and deadlines, the target populations that are being served by FEMs (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

The legal framework and the Ministry guidance establish that the documentation that schools need to gather to propose opening a FEM must include: target population diagnosis, academic proposal, pedagogic resources, and implementation guide (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). Schools (and in some cases, private organisations or local NGOs) proposing to open FEMs present the required documents to the Ministry, which evaluates the proposal and certifies FEMs that are approved by the evaluation committee.

Any school or private organisation can use the five FEM models to be adapted for their target population. An additional option that schools/organisations have is to create a specialised, independent FEM to meet the unique needs of their target population. By 2018, there were 39 certified individual/specialised FEM programmes being implemented in different regions (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). However, there is a lack of information around the individual/specialised models, given that they are small scale and have private property rights, and that the MoE doesn't report information about them (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022).

SECTION 5

ASSESSING THE CURRENT STATE OF FEMS PROVISION



In this section, we assess the extent to which FEMs that operate at present in the country support the objective of education for all children and youth. We use Tomaševski's 4As framework (Tomaševski, 2001) which assesses the degree to which education provision is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to particular groups of learners. This framework helps us to understand if FEMs are meeting the needs/demand of OOSCY.

As described above, FEMs served 1,719,062 learners in Colombia during 2020 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022), but still many (estimates vary widely, from 141,266 children in primary and lower secondary [2019 data], to 5.2 million children and youth between early childhood years and high school [2015 data]) are out of school. Still many others are at risk of dropping out, and, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of OOSCY are expected to increase. In terms of quality, the literature review showed a lack of data around monitoring, assessment, and retention rates in FEMs. The middle–low enrolment level in FEMs compared to the number of OOSCY, alongside lack of completion/transition and learning outcomes data, points to challenges related to the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of these programmes.

5.1 Availability of FEMs

One of the primary challenges contributing to FEMs only reaching a fraction of the OOSCY in the country is the growth of the CYVMF population and the impact of school closures on drop-out rates during the pandemic, increasing the demand for FEM programmes. FEMs are the main educational strategy to meet the academic needs of diverse populations of OOSCY, but the supply of FEMs seems to be insufficient to meet the increasing demand at a national scale, especially for secondary grades.

FEMs are part of the formal education system, serving diverse populations or those in vulnerable conditions, including, as stated by UNESCO (Radinger et al., 2018): students with special needs, students who didn't complete formal education, students who belong to an ethnic minority, students who live in rural areas, and migrant students who require integration into society. In most cases, these situations will lead to overage; therefore, FEMs are very useful for students with such characteristics. However, FEM programmes are only serving approximately 17% of the student enrolment in public schools, while there are 1.2 to 5.2 million school-aged children and youth out of school, which shows that there is not enough availability of FEMs in all schools (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

According to the MoE, the school lag (overage) is the gap between age and grade that occurs when a child or a young person is 2 or 3 years older than the average age expected to attend a certain grade (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2018b) (see Section 4.1). In that sense, during 2019, official data (DANE, 2021b) reported that 25.8% of all the students enrolled in Colombia were considered overaged, which shows the evident necessity for reviewing policies on repetition and strengthening educational programmes for this group of students that is not being appropriately catered to by the education system at a national scale.

Regarding the average age expected to attend school grades in Colombia, there are four educational levels divided by ages: preschool 5-year-olds, primary 6–10-year-olds, lower secondary 11–14-year-olds, and upper secondary 12–17-year-olds as seen in Section 4.1 (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994). FEMs programmes are offered for students aged 5 to 17 who, due to diverse factors, are overaged, have drop-out risk or have abandoned school. However, most of the FEMs are being implemented in primary grades, showing a lack of availability of secondary and middle-school programmes for students from 11 to 17 years old (UNICEF Colombia, 2020), beyond the lack of data for these ages made evident in Section 2 and 3 above.

5.2 Accessibility of FEMs

As seen before in Sections 3 and 4, Colombia has a strong legal framework to protect the right to education for every child and youth in the country, regardless of their social background, physical conditions or nationality. However, there are still some access barriers for specific groups of OOSCY in Colombia, where the bureaucratic requirements for migrant students, the urban–rural gap, and the inequality between regions emerge as the main factors to explain this issue.

While all children and youth in Colombia have the fundamental right to education including, with the temporary protection status now in place, CYVMF (Migración Colombia, 2021), there is still a requirement for the latter to have national ID to receive their official diploma at a Colombian school once they finish their primary and secondary studies through a FEM or a traditional model. According to one stakeholder interviewed (C.8, AE implementer, sub-national local NGO staff), this leads to a situation where some migrant students don't have access to lower and upper secondary grades due to their lack of national ID preventing them receiving their official primary diploma.

Despite the fact that educational coverage in primary grades has increased due to the creation of multigrade primary schools in dispersed rural communities, and the development of FEM programmes to attend diverse populations, there is still a lack of FEM programmes offered in secondary grades for OOSCY, especially in rural areas, where transport and distances are more complex (UNICEF Colombia, 2020). Based on interviews with local NGOs (C.3, AE implementer, national-level local NGO) and teachers implementing FEMs in the country (C.6, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher), in Colombia FEM students in rural schools face access barriers, such as geographical obstacles that increase transport costs, and the costs of books and other materials. In some cases, these costs are supported by local NGOs or INGOs that are part of the humanitarian actors of the Education Cluster, such as UNICEF, NRC, Save The Children, Plan International, and World Vision (Renna, 2020). But in other others, those costs depend on the local government's financial capacities, which are unequal across the country.

To illustrate the above, the General Education Law (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994) defines that the public budget transfers from the MoE to the education secretariats depends, mostly, on their student-enrolment levels, which means that areas with a large urban population receive more financial support and are more capable of sustaining coverage and quality education programmes than small rural provinces where drop-out rates are higher (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

The decentralisation of the education system in Colombia gives economic, political, and curricular autonomy to local governments and schools. Given the autonomy that schools have in the legal framework, students and families can only get access to FEMs if the school offers the programme. This produces the effect that there are more educational offerings, in general, in urban places, but more FEMs specifically in rural communities, given the needs of their populations. Besides, in Colombia there is one MoE and 96 local education authorities (education secretariats), and there are evident inequalities in school access between one secretariat and another depending on their territory's conditions (population, public budget, rural/urban distribution). Based on the interview with a former MoE official (C.5, regulator, national-level government official) this also translates into inequalities in levels of resourcing, network capacities, and how effectively individual secretariats are able to implement FEM models on their territories.

It is important to note that there isn't enough data to disaggregate whether FEM provision is enough in conflict-affected areas in rural settings, where, as seen in Section 3, the necessity is high due to the OOSCY numbers; therefore, a conclusion cannot be reached as to whether FEMs are accessible for that part of the OOSCY population. Also, it is interesting to note that according to DANE (2021b), in 2020 the greatest participation of boys was in FEMs (53.5% vs. 46.5% girls), which means this portion of the population that was highlighted in Section 3 as one of the most vulnerable is being catered to, somehow, by these programmes.

5.3 Acceptability of FEMs

In terms of acceptability, FEMs are recognised as a formal education strategy and part of the country's strong legal framework that protects the right to education for all children and youth. In addition, due to their success in diverse contexts, especially in multigrade rural schools, some data and interviews conducted showed that FEMs are well received and appreciated by the communities they serve, but there is still not enough data available to make strong conclusions on this matter (as mentioned in previous sections).

Regarding the legal framework, the General Education Law established that all the FEMs approved by the MoE are authorised to certify their students' primary or secondary studies. This certificate is valid for access to public and private schools and other official education institutions (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994). The FEM programmes for primary grades are generally focused on developing reading, writing and maths competences, while FEMs for secondary grades add to that list competences in nature and social sciences (UNICEF Colombia, 2020). Colombia doesn't have a national curriculum; it is up to each school to define it based on their context. However, schools do not always revisit the study plan or make changes, therefore it depends on the teachers' skills to adapt and fit the contents to the needs of specific groups of students (C.6, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher).

The national legal framework gives schools the independence to define their pedagogical models, curriculum and FEMs. Schools are free to decide whether they implement FEMs. School authorities define pedagogical models, curriculum, students' evaluation system and FEMs implementation. The MoE releases a technical concept for the FEM curriculum, methodology and contents (see Section 4.2.2). NGOs, international organisations and schools are in charge of implementation. Although the MoE has properly established the institutional processes to approve FEMs in the country, there is no official data in terms of retention, completion, and learning achievement, representing a lack of availability for monitoring strategies that affects further analysis of the FEMs impacts and results (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022).

Based on successful outcomes, since the 1990s, the curriculum and pedagogical resources of FEM programmes such as Escuela Nueva and PER have been adapted to different contexts and diverse populations, to respond to the increasing demand for these models, especially in rural communities. In most cases, they have been perceived to be of good quality to strengthen basic competences in students for school reintroduction (C.7, AE coordinator, subnational-level UN body staff); however, there is no official data in public resources about the actual academic performance of FEMs students, which appears to be an issue to determining concrete conclusions.

Most of the pedagogical strategies used by FEMs are well-received by teachers in rural schools, especially in primary multigrade schools, as they bring them contents, activities and resources that make their work more efficient. Additionally, most of the teachers implementing FEM programmes receive educational resources and some type of pedagogical training (UNICEF Colombia, 2020). However, regarding curriculum, recent documentation (Rogan et al., 2020) points to the lack of teacher training for FEMs implementation and Venezuelan-influx-related circumstances (socioemotional support, xenophobia, knowledge of their needs and understanding of their situation).

5.4 Adaptability of FEMs

The very nature of FEMs and the legal framework behind them makes adaptability one of their main strengths. The General Education Law (Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994) gives autonomy to local governments and schools to develop, adapt, and implement FEMs, hence, there is a diversity of different FEMs (5 main MoE FEMs and 39 unique and tailored FEMs) being implemented in Colombia. However, more evidence, data and case studies are needed to better understand how schools, education secretariats, local NGOs, and INGOs are successfully adapting them to cater to the needs of different OOSCY.

The intellectual rights of the academic and pedagogic resources of the five main FEM programmes implemented in Colombia are the property of the MoE, meaning that they are for public access to be adapted by schools or private organisations (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020). These 5 FEMs are present in the whole territory, in all regions of Colombia, due, in part, to the fact that schools and organisations are free to implement them. Being part of the intellectual rights property of the MoE makes the case for these initiatives to be universal, and therefore present in different territories and open to adaptation according to specific students' needs.

As seen in Section 4, FEMs seek to cater to students and OOSCY in vulnerable conditions, such as internal displacement, international migration, poverty, armed conflict, among others. In that sense, Bagby et al. (2021) showed that evaluations of FEMs in Latin America and the Caribbean suggest that

FEMs may have positive effects on nonviolent crime and social-emotional skills, but the evidence is weak. In Colombia, children who have experienced displacement as a result of civil conflict, drug violence, and natural disasters are eligible to participate in a government-sponsored FEM, the “Aceleración de Aprendizaje” programme. Independent studies of the programme provide evidence from FEM teachers and students indicating that the programme enables participants to develop emotional self-regulation, increase self-esteem, and improve communication skills. These studies, however, are purely qualitative and prevent us from drawing conclusions about the impact of FEMs. They also do not provide evidence on the associations between social-emotional outcomes and specific programme mechanisms (such as the curriculum, safe environment, and peer relationships). (p. 206)

The curricular and pedagogical flexibility of FEMs reinforce their adaptable nature. When different FEM implementers were interviewed (C.6 & C.10, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher) different modalities of the models were evidenced. In La Guajira (C.10, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher), for example, the teacher was hired by a public school, and some hours during the week he worked at a teen criminal-justice centre with teenagers who had committed a minor crime and had to attend the centre and advance in their studies while being supervised to not commit any other felonies. In Arauca (C.6, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher), UNICEF hired tutors to work with focused students to accelerate their learning processes to acquire basic competences in less time, to allow them to enrol in their age-expected grade.

However, teacher training remains a big void in this situation and the scarce evidence shows contradictions on this matter: it is not the best teachers who teach in rural or vulnerable areas in Colombia as described by a recent IDB study (Elacqua et al., 2018). Additionally, there's a lack of teacher training programmes focused on how to adapt contents to specific needs, and teachers end up doing what they can with what they have and quality ends up at stake (C.13, AE implementer, subnational-level semiautonomous agency).

For instance, FEM programmes, educational resources, and teacher training do not necessarily address the needs of Venezuelan children who migrated to Colombia, internally displaced people who move from region to region, children affected by armed conflict, among other situations that create vulnerability and OOSCY. These populations have a variety of needs that vary from profile to profile. One constant that emerged during the interviews with an FEM teacher (C.6, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher) and local NGO implementor (C.8, AE implementer, subnational-level local NGO staff) was growing-up with toxic stress: these students might need to address emotional difficulties before learning how to subtract or memorise the periodic table. This might represent a challenge for teachers; socioemotional, crisis training would be needed in addition to the academic training, as what was mentioned in the acceptability section.

SECTION 6

UNDERSTANDING THE WIDER CONTEXTS INFLUENCING THE ABILITY OF FEMs TO MEET THE NEEDS OF OOSCY

In light of what has been discussed in previous sections, this section explains why and how FEMs may/may not be available, acceptable, adaptable and/or accessible to OOSCY as they could or should be. Within this analysis, we situate FEMs in the wider political economy of education of Colombia and explore how they are constrained (positively and negatively) by the ways in which resourcing and decision making around the needs of OOSCY are made, as well as the level of political ownership and will which exists to both recognise particular groups of OOSCY and ensure the education which is provided to them effectively meets their right to a quality education.

6.1 A Strong Legal Framework Around FEMs and the Right to Education of OOSCY

Since the establishment of the FEM programmes as a formal education strategy in the General Education Law, during the 1990s, the development of guidelines, standards and resources for these types of models have increased in Colombia. These efforts have been supported by the MoE, the education secretariats, local NGOs and international organisations (Equipo Técnico Nacional, 2020).

In that process, two of the main challenges have been to develop FEM programmes to increase educational coverage for diverse populations and to deliver teacher training strategies for this type of model. Regarding these challenges, the principal successes have been, firstly, the development of FEM programmes for diverse populations such as learners with special education needs and Indigenous and Black communities. Secondly, the free public access to five FEM resources through the MoE has made it possible for more models to adapt and implement them in different territories, for instance Escuela Nueva, the most used FEM in the country.

As discussed above, besides the five FEM whose intellectual rights are owned by the MoE, 39 (and counting) have been created on a local level by different types of stakeholders after the MoE provides a technical concept (see Section 4.2.2). The role of the MoE has been mostly focused on supporting the provision of technical concepts of FEMs' creation, teachers' salary funding, and pedagogical support through guidelines.

Based on the fact that FEM programmes are defined as a formal education strategy in Colombia, private and public schools are in charge of reporting student enrolment data to the respective education secretariat. The education secretariats then organise all the information in their jurisdiction to share it later with the MoE. The latter institution monitors and consolidates

the national enrolment information reported annually. However, there is an evident lack of monitoring and assessment in the FEM programmes to further analyse completion rates, student outcomes, learning achievements, and academic performance (Ministerio de Educación Nacional Colombia, 2022). It seems that this “flexible” characteristic enables the model to meet a variety of needs in different contexts; however, the question remains as to how to do a rigorous follow-up to such diversity.

6.2 The Supply of FEMs Does not Address the Increasing Demand From OOSCY

Taking into account the increasing numbers of OOSCY due to the social issues highlighted in Section 3, besides the pandemic school closures, Venezuelan migration influx, and the internal armed conflict hitting certain regions of the country more strongly, the student population catered to by FEMs in Colombia seems small, which shows the lack of institutional support from the MoE and the local education secretariats to encourage schools in the development of this type of model to cater to the OOSCY population.

UNESCO (Renna, 2020) mentioned that although there’s no data regarding total participation or gap in access to these flexible education programmes, it is evident that the demand is greater than the supply. They even mentioned that it has been shown that, in Cucuta, there are many children and youth whose age does not correspond to the grade they must enter; however, there is no capacity to scale FEM programmes to cater to these students and OOSCY (Renna, 2020).

Furthermore, Renna (2020) showed that the magnitude and speed of displacement together with the education system’s structural limitations has weakened the availability of the right to education. Risks, violence, administrative barriers, and difficulties in the recognition of prior education for migrant students hinder accessibility. The weakness in addressing the socioemotional dimensions and responding to the diverse learning needs of the population makes acceptability difficult. Chronic underfinancing, coordination difficulties, operational challenges, and an overflow of institutional capacities slow down adaptability. The lack of institutionalisation of spaces for social participation for the migrant and refugee population, as well as a monitoring system still in the making, reduces commitment to ensuring access to education by these learners (Renna, 2020).

6.3 Decentralisation and Flexibility: A System’s Structure That Generates Both Opportunities and Failures

As mentioned, Colombia has a decentralised education system in which the responsibility for management of education is allocated to municipalities or departments, which, in turn, must abide by national laws and regulations. Also, there’s no national curriculum but a set of national basic competency standards that should be fulfilled by schools, with it up to each school to decide how they will accomplish these. This system allows local customs, practices and needs

to be (hopefully) reflected in the educational offer, thus, the possibility of needs-driven curricula at a school level. It is in this context that FEMs are afforded the necessary legislative flexibility to be more adaptable and responsive to the needs of their local OOSCY population, and, in fact, are mandated to do so in how they are established.

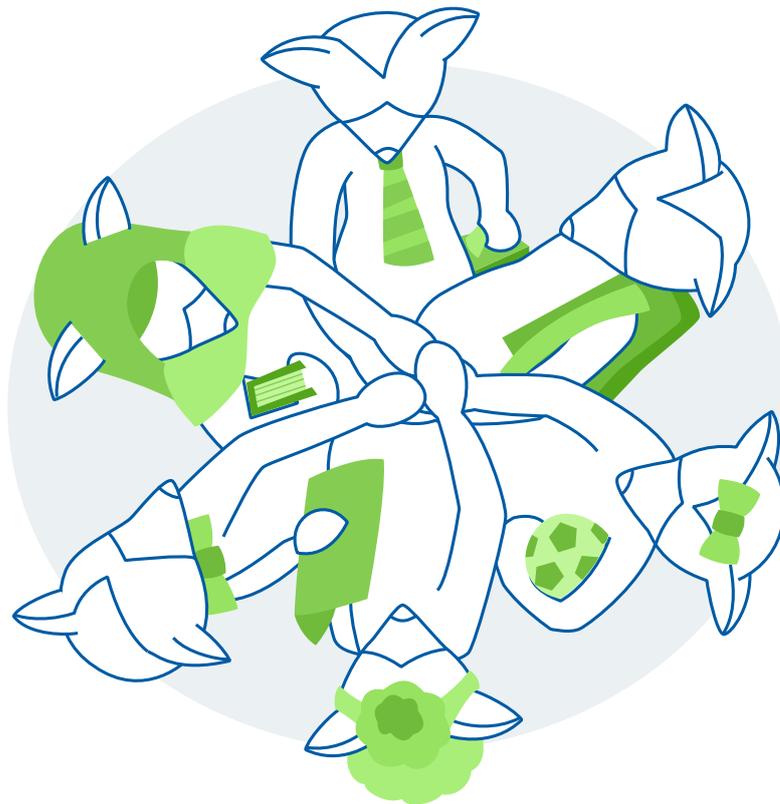
However, this decentralised structure, while affording flexibility at the level of implementation, also presents constraints in terms of funding, regulation, and quality provision. As reflected in previous sections, there are important coverage and quality gaps amongst regions/secretariats, depending, mostly, on their social context and their institutional capacities which are also reflected on schools' conditions and programmes; and if there is no national-central interest or mandate for the improvement, regulation, supply, capacity and focus of the programmes offered at a local level, the characteristics of FEM will vary greatly between secretariats.

The decentralisation and flexibility characteristics of the education system enable an important support from INGOs, but, at the same time, generate a lack of coordination. As mentioned by different stakeholders in the interviews (C.4, AE implementer, subnational-level local NGO staff; C.7, AE coordinator, subnational-level UN body staff) and in the literature review (Renna, 2020), the role of international cooperation and INGOs is very important for the provision of FEMs in Colombia. However, as it is called condescendingly, there's a vests' runway taking place in different regions of the country where, for example, there's more presence of CYVMF. The vests' runway refers to the situation where several INGOs are intervening in the same contexts (each organisation with a vest in a different color), all providing the same service (water, bathrooms, batteries, books, social interventions) without taking into account a do-no harm approach: the impact they might have in the rest of the community that is also in need but did not make the cut to be part of the intervention. Donors have their geopolitical interest in Colombia tied to armed conflict, Venezuelan migration, etc., so they focus on populations that are of concern to them to the exclusion of others that might also be in high need. Organising donors and interventions might ensure other OOSCY populations are reached, as well and avoid overintervention for certain groups, such as enrolled CYVMF (Rogan et al., 2020).

The local secretariats, schools and communities understand their needs very well, and it might be a matter of improved coordination amongst entities present in each region to ensure that resources are distributed in a better way, therefore offering more universal coverage of FEMs in each context.

SECTION 7

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS



In this final section, we reflect upon the key findings discussed in Sections 3 through 6 and make recommendations for the AEWG and national stakeholders working in accelerated education to address and overcome obstacles or bottlenecks in the funding, regulation, and provision of FEMs to meet the needs and demands of OOSCY. Table 10 lists the several opportunities to engage at present and the risks for that engagement, as well as providing insights into the strengths and needs found in the PEA. The table does not list all challenges, but rather highlights those for which there is a notable opportunity given the current political and institutional will and capacity for change.

Table 10

Recommendations, Enablers and Constraints for AEPs in Colombia

Strengths	Needs	Opportunities to engage at present	Risks of engagement
COVID-19 and Venezuelan influx made OOSCY more visible.	Encourage decision makers to advance FEMs.	New national government in August 2022.	Lack of coordination among implementers.
Robust legal framework protecting education rights of OOSCY.	Create platform to map, monitor and better understand FEMs' impact in diverse contexts.	Local NGOs and INGOs with experience developing FEMs.	Decentralised decision-making processes.
Flexibility for FEM creation and implementation due to decentralisation and school autonomy.	Articulate implementers.	There are five well-established FEMs that are in the public domain which have been adapted to diverse populations.	Lack of data on OOSCY numbers and FEMs' impact.

As mentioned in Section 3, school closures and distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made the OOSCY situation visible in Colombia, as well as the high Venezuelan influx which has stressed the education system to its limits.²² These could be seen as both strengths and opportunities for the AEWG and national stakeholders working in accelerated education to engage at present. Also, as seen throughout Section 4, the robust legal framework present in Colombia, which both obliges the government and entities to provide access to education for all, is an enabler for intended solutions such as AEPs (or FEMs in the Colombian context) for OOSCY. Finally, the flexibility for FEM creation and implementation, a product of the Colombian decentralised system and decision making, has been identified in this analysis as a strength and a risk at the same time. It is a strength because it enables private and public legal entities to present FEMs without needing certification by the MoE (although it does issue a technical concept of quality, see Section 4.2.2), therefore allowing implementers to adapt the model to various needs, contexts and populations (showing a high degree of adaptability as discussed in Section 5.4). However, as mentioned, this flexibility can also be a risk and be, in part, together with the decentralised characteristic of the education system, a cause of the evident lack of coordination among multiple implementers, resulting in no national efforts for information collection or systematisation, leading to the lack of data on the models and their impact, as mentioned in the limitations segment of Section 2.

The risks of engagement above create needs which could be studied by the AEWG or any stakeholders working in accelerated education or seeking to address the OOSCY situation in Colombia. First, and given the current emergency situation due to COVID-19 and the Venezuelan influx, there's a great need to encourage decision makers to flag this as an urgent matter on the national agenda and map already existing working solutions (such as the FEMs) and avoid building

²² Situations like the internal armed conflict have happened for so many decades now that sadly it doesn't trigger alarm unless there's an incident such as a displacement, bombardment, or such.

brand new programmes that may require more resources, another legal framework, and more time. With decision makers, enough emphasis should be made on the fact that it is imperative for the state to guarantee the right to education of populations that, for various reasons, have not been able to access or remain in the educational system, or who are at risk of abandoning it. There doesn't seem to be enough attention and importance given to FEMs as a plausible and effective solution for OOSCY by the secretariats and MoE. In most of the cases, this seems to be related to a lack of knowledge around FEMs by key decision makers.

In addition to the previous need, to solve the lack of information, the creation of a platform to map, monitor and better understand FEMs' impact in diverse contexts is highlighted as an urgent need. Clear quality assurance standards/benchmarks/guidelines for all FEMs, with a standardised process for reporting and data collection about key outcomes of interest, could channel the efforts of INGOs, NGOs, funders and researchers in an organised matter, hence focus on what OOSCY really need: taken from the analysis in Section 3, a big focus should be placed on rural children and youth, between Grades 5 and 6; CYVMF; and children and youth victims of armed conflict or living in the municipalities most affected by it. With this mapping of already existing FEMs, services could be provided where there's a lack of such programmes, enabling learners and communities to understand how FEMs work and how to access them. The coordination of implementers could be both a consequence and enabler of the mapping efforts, right now; and, as mentioned by a FEM teacher (C.10, AE implementer, subnational-level FEM teacher), too many efforts are directed to the same communities creating a harmful environment²³: coordinated implementers could operate under a do-no-harm logic.

Related to the decision makers' agenda point mentioned above, one opportunity is the fact that in mid-2022 a new government will take office in Colombia. This situation could help pivot the national priorities and have the AEWG or stakeholders working in accelerated education, or with OOSCY, advocate for FEMs as an already existing solution to the OOSCY situation. Given that, as described throughout the report, the education sector is decentralised, advocacy efforts by external entities or stakeholders such as those who make up the AEWG and who have such an important presence in Colombia will be greatly appreciated and hopefully listened to. A working group composed of current AEWG members and representatives from the MoE would have an important leverage on a national scope: if the MoE more vocally supported FEMs nationally, and argued for FEMs to be scaled up, it could translate into secretariats feeling compelled to set up and support more FEMs.

In addition to the latter, there's recognition of the importance of the role and success of the work of INGOs in Colombia in several areas of child development in vulnerable contexts. In regard to this report, their experience as implementers of FEMs could be very well used in order to build on what has already been advanced. This is very important given the possibility that the MoE and secretariats might lack the capacity to assess and follow up on the state of the FEMs, hence the important role of the other entities involved in a working group. Finally, the fact that Colombia has five well-established FEMs that are in the public domain, have been adapted to diverse populations, and are known in different regions of the country, is an important step and asset for a possible process to strengthen the model.

²³ As could be seen in a visit to La Guajira department, some schools in Riohacha city have interventions from 4 INGOs, all providing water in the return-to-school process, and they were selected because of the high enrolment rate for CYVMF. However, nearby schools with only Colombian students but with the same (or deeper) needs have no interventions because their numbers aren't attractive enough.

SECTION 8

ANNEXES

8.1 Annex 1: List of Interviews

Interview code	Interviewee type	Level	Organisation type
C.1	AE Regulator	National level	Government official
C.2	Expert	National level	Academy member
C.3	AE implementer	National level	Local NGO/CBO staff
C.4	AE implementer	Subnational level	Local NGO/CBO staff
C.5	AE regulator	National level	Government official
C.6	AE implementer	Subnational level	FEM teacher
C.7	AE coordinator	Subnational level	UN body staff
C.8	AE implementer	Subnational level	Local NGO/CBO staff
C.9	AE regulator	Subnational level	Government official
C.10	AE implementer	Subnational level	FEM teacher
C.11	AE funder	National level and Subnational level	Local NGO/CBO staff
C.12	AE funder	National level and Subnational level	Local NGO/CBO staff
C.13	AE implementer	Subnational level	Local NGO/CBO staff

8.2 Annex 2: List of Documents Reviewed

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