

Equity in Dispute: From Education Policies to School Practices of Stratification and Standardization

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DESCRIPTORES:

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RESUMEN:

La equidad es uno de los objetivos por los que muestran un gran interés Organismos Internacionales (OI) y la Unión Europea para conseguir un crecimiento económico y para combatir la desigualdad educativa. Sin embargo, potencian la estratificación y la estandarización educativa. Nuestra investigación es de carácter cualitativo, a través de un Estudio de Caso intrínseco, con entrevistas semiestructuradas, informantes clave y documentos de políticas educativas. Realizamos un muestreo teórico en Andalucía con once personas entrevistadas pertenecientes a centros de formación, equipos directivos, docentes, altos puestos de sindicatos, altos cargos... Nos interesan especialmente los desafíos que van en contra de la equidad: La *estratificación* educativa, donde confluyen agrupamientos escolares homogéneos, selección temprana de los estudiantes, repetición de curso y políticas de elección; y la *estandarización* educativa con autonomía de centros, responsabilidad y rendición de cuentas, que plantean un modelo técnico de la educación. Podemos afirmar que las políticas de separación de estudiantes producen una segregación relativamente alta. Se convierten en una selección de clases pudientes donde confluyen agrupamientos por rentas de las familias. La cultura de la estandarización de la evaluación es un nuevo colonialismo y un mecanismo de control que no mejora la educación.

KEYWORDS:

Equity
Stratification
Educational
Standardization
Case study
School segregation

ABSTRACT:

Equity is one of the objectives in which International Organizations (IO) and the European Union show great interest to achieve economic growth and to combat educational inequality. However, they enhance educational stratification and standardization. The research is qualitative, and carried out through an intrinsic Case Study, with semi-structured interviews, key informants and educational policy documents. We carried out a theoretical sampling in Andalusia with eleven interviewed people belonging to teacher training centers, school management teams, teachers, senior union officials, senior administrative officials... We are especially interested in the challenges that go against equity: Educational stratification, where they converge homogeneous school groupings, early selection of students, grade repetition and choice policies; and educational standardization with autonomy of centers, responsibility and accountability, which propose a technical model of education. We can affirm that student separation policies produce relatively high segregation. It can be stated that student separation policies produce relatively high segregation. They become a selection of wealthy classes where family income groups converge. The culture of assessment standardization is a new colonialism and a control mechanism that does not improve education.

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1. Introduction

As the Eurydice report (2021) asserts, European societies can become fairer and more inclusive if we get education systems to develop “equity policies”. The Sustainable Development Goals in education also identify the advancement of education as a priority, with the objective of ensuring that it enables upward socio-economic mobility, which has been identified as a key factor in escaping poverty. This issue has been identified as a significant concern noted in numerous reports, such as OECD (2017), Save the Children (2021) and World Bank (2017, 2021).

We begin with the premise that existing inequalities in society are becoming increasingly prevalent in educational research (Soria, 2022). Consequently, there is a need for approaches that challenge inequity, oppression and injustice and that are linked to global challenges. The focus of our research is to identify indicators that define equity. These include stratification, which consists of grouping students into different schools or classes according to ability or interest, and standardisation, which is an ‘effective’ strategy characterised by autonomy, accountability and private sector management techniques.

Since 2000, the processes of globalisation of the public policy economy have made education systems the key to achieving more competitive national economies with greater social cohesion and democratic values. The challenge of introducing changes and innovations in the face of new challenges is related to the concern to raise educational standards and improve performance in all countries and among students, with the aim of reducing the gap between the richest and the poorest. This idea involves international organisations such as the OECD (2023), the World Bank (2023), Eurydice (2021) and UNESCO (2017) which, together with the European Union, have become prominent political actors, influencing the development of equity.

In Spain, only 23 % of the adult population attains the highest level of upper secondary education, whereas the EU average is 45.8 % and the OECD average is 41.2 %. Furthermore, there is a considerable degree of disparity and inequality among the Autonomous Communities. A particularly concerning demographic is that of young people aged 18-24 who are neither in education nor employed, and who are also not engaged in any form of economic activity. The average for the European Union is 14.2 %, while the OECD reports a figure of 16 %, with Spain at 20.3 % and Italy at 27.1 % (OECD, 2022, p. 73).

Analytical and methodological approaches are now closely aligned with Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), which interrogates the roots, assumptions and foundations of policies; how they are developed; the differences between rhetoric, policy discourse, and reality; the distribution of power and resources; and that under-represented individuals and groups are at the centre of research and explore the impact of policies on inequality and inequity (Diem and Brooks, 2021). The role of schools and their teachers in the production of educational policies has been discussed from theoretical perspectives, thereby conferring an unusual importance on the context of educational practice (Ball et al. 2012; Beech and Meo, 2016). Policy analysis should be conducted with consideration of the diverse levels of the policy formulation process (meso and micro) and the shared elements that are exerting influence in global education.

2. State of play

2.1. *Equity in education policies*

The focus of this research lies in delving into different contexts - political, administrative, educational, training, trade union and activist - to identify, analyse and understand educational policies related to school practices and the promotion of equity, understood as the fundamental right to education, combating vulnerability, dependence and domination (Silva, 2020; Fernández-Pavlovich, 2019) and with the reduction of inequality and discrimination.

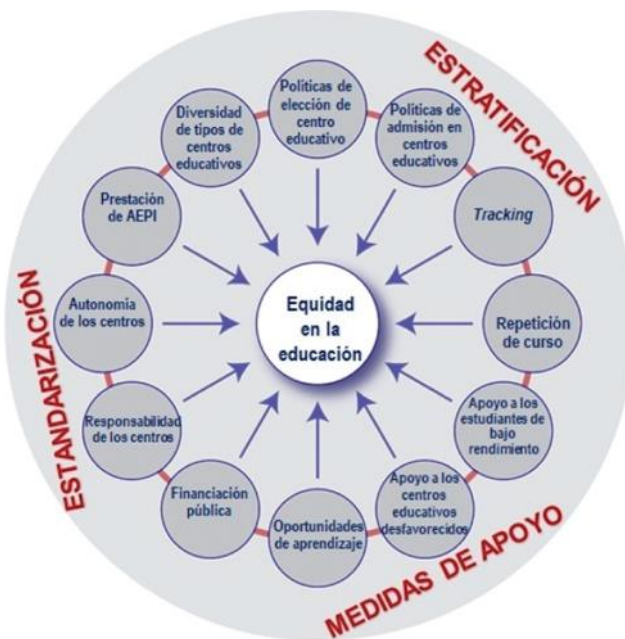
The advent of “quality and equity” education systems may be perceived as a “global” concern, with the objective of enhancing educational quality and school continuity. In accordance with international recommendations, it is proposed that improvements be made to the education system on the basis of regarding it as a management problem (OECD, 2017). The issue of education is evolving from a social, cultural and political concern to a management problem that can be addressed. This entails measuring school effectiveness based on results, transforming underperforming schools into more effective ones, and holding teachers accountable for this task. Resources take a back seat to comparative student performance data (Mons, 2009). In the academic literature, these models of private management and management efficiency are the subject of debate, with many opposing them to models of equity and inclusion of immigrant and disadvantaged populations. These policies attempt to hold teachers accountable for school success without taking into account the cultural and social capital of students (Rodríguez Martínez, 2019).

The 2008 crisis has influenced the resurgence of school segregation in Spain, marking a reversal of the decline that had been observed since 2000. The reduction of public funding in the education system, in conjunction with the deterioration of teachers’ conditions, has created a gap in the social composition of schools, accompanied by the poverty and exclusion suffered by one in three children in Spain. In our country, this phenomenon is more prevalent among families with a high socio-economic and cultural level, which may be explained by the interest of the middle or high levels for their children to attend single-sex schools. This segregation will be facilitated by school choice policies, single district and ranking publications, quasi-market mechanisms, as evidenced by the Autonomous Community of Madrid, which is currently the most segregated region in Spain and the second most segregated in Europe after Hungary (Murillo and Martínez-Garrido, 2018).

The argument is that policies linked to equity are, in fact, measures of stratification, standardisation and educational support. Standardisation is associated with curricula and assessments, as previously discussed, and support measures aim to mitigate the disadvantages that occur for the most vulnerable learners in the classroom.

Graph 1

Systemic factors that can influence equity in school education



Note. From Eurydice (2021, p. 15).

2.2. Stratification of schooling

The measures under consideration are those which facilitate the stratification of students into distinct categories, such as classes, schools or school programmes, based on their abilities, interests and other characteristics. These are policies on: the choice of school, the admission criteria, early differentiation in pathways (tracking) and grade repetition. All these measures serve to increase school segregation and exert a detrimental influence on the equity of education systems.

The indicators employed to define equity are the inclusion dimension - understood as the measure of levels between high and low achievers - and the social justice dimension - as the correlation between students' performance and their socio-economic background (Eurydice, 2021). The data used are: education policies of national units, international surveys on student performance (PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS) and statistical data from Eurostat.

Pàmies and Castejón (2015) posit that a first group of countries may be identified according to their student selection policies. These countries are characterised by comprehensive education systems, low levels of student differentiation within schools and a common curriculum. The Nordic countries - Iceland, Finland and Norway - represent an example of this first group. In these countries, students are grouped heterogeneously and receive support in their own classrooms. Conversely, the most differentiated systems are those observed in Central Europe, specifically Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg. In these countries, students are separated at an early age (10-12 years) into educational pathways, each offering different certifications and curricula. Furthermore, countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom also separate students within classrooms.

Studies on the effects of student separation policies indicate that less comprehensive education systems with early academic pathways are associated with lower equity (Ferrel et al., 2009). Furthermore, students who are disadvantaged by early institutional differentiation tend to achieve at a lower level (Dronkers et al., 2011). We can state

that there is a relatively high level of school segregation due to stratification affecting the most vulnerable pupils.

In Spain, there is an increasing tendency to promote school choice, supported by the dual school network, which pits public schools against private schools and, as a consequence, public schools against each other in order to attract students. This results in the promotion of quasi-market education policies, which are the processes that most encourage competition between schools. These policies include public funding of private management, outsourcing of services, expansion or elimination of school zones, publication of results and family preference (Rogeró-García and Andrés-Cancelas, 2020).

2.3. Autonomy and standardisation of education

Autonomy is exercised in the interests of politicians and the administration of the education system. The autonomy in question is limited and not accompanied by decentralisation, which has the potential to negatively impact equity (*sic*). In Europe, false autonomy is limited to decisions pertaining to teaching methods, textbook selection, and the management of human resources. The scope for organisational and curricular autonomy is decided by managers who develop the content of the compulsory curriculum, the allocation of resources and responsibility for accountability (Eurydice, 2021).

The 1970s crisis gave rise to a climate of distrust towards certain sectors, including education, because the investments made in this sector did not yield the Cancels expected economic development and welfare. This results in severe economic cuts to social programmes and a concomitant rise in distrust of teachers, which will introduce the *accountability* movement in Anglo-Saxon policies (Martín-Rodríguez, 2010). There is also the development of “quality management” models, which are understood to represent an improvement in the products of the educational system and its profitability, a language that appeals to educational managers, administrators and politicians, who have observed a system of optimisation of educational management, where measurement instruments are overvalued in order to improve quality, without questioning the educational goals.

From the 1990s onwards, the neoliberal discourse also relies on this low level of managerial responsibility, but with the novelty at this time of attributing student failure to the poor performance of teachers, with the emergence of evaluation mechanisms as a threatening discourse for teachers (Tedesco, 2016). Furthermore, the linking of educational improvement to information on results and competition between schools is presented as the main mechanism for achieving this improvement.

In the face of the plurality of education, school governance is realised through the standardised culture of assessment as a control mechanism, in which teachers and students are modelled (Collet and Tort, 2016). Standardised tests turn them into active agents delimiting the way of doing and being in a performative society (Ball, 2013). School autonomy is also restricted by international bodies to the collective of management teams and in a specific accountability function (Espejo and Álvarez, 2020).

In conclusion, the reforms represent a paradigm shift in education systems, previously oriented by the investment of resources (input) and now by the verifiable performance of students (output). This approach has been termed the “new governance”, which represents a return to “black box” mechanisms for the evolution of education systems. This entails the implementation of standards and assessment instruments, level-based

testing, and the redesign of the curriculum across all countries, because individualisation and competence-oriented teaching are seen as making teaching and learning more effective (FEND, 2012).

3. Methodological Approach

The overarching objective of this research is to describe and comprehend, as well as to disseminate to relevant sectors, equity education policies and practices, their recontextualization and development, with the aim of advancing knowledge generation in the context of school stratification and standardisation in international and regional education systems.

In order to achieve this objective, the research is qualitative in nature and is developed through an intrinsic Case Study, ethnographic in nature, where the case is given by the field of enquiry (Stake, 2010), the recontextualization and changes in educational policies in different socio-educational scenarios, including educational administration, schools and training institutions, as well as a plurality of social actors, including policy professionals, social organisations, administration technicians, teachers, trade unionists and management teams. The study of phenomena is undertaken from the perspective of their own frames of reference, taking into account the way they experience and interpret the social reality they construct in their interaction (Ceballos-Vacas et al., 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, the case was selected, contextualised, and its objectives and research domains established. The sources and techniques of data collection and data analysis were also selected. Rather than employing open-ended questions, we utilise scopes of enquiry to provide guidance for the conduct of interviews.

Table 1
Research Objectives, Codes, Categories and Areas of Research

Objectives	Codes	Categories	Areas of research
1. Stratification between schools	Differentiation of centres and choice policies	Management and financing: public/ concerted private - Zoning - Schooling Commissions	1. School differences in choice policies 2. Privatisation through charter schools 3. Social demand and free of charge
2. Stratification between classes	Academic groupings in schools	Premature itineraries (VET and PMAR) Course repetition	1. Early differentiation in itineraries (tracking). 2. Repetition and segregation
3. Standardisation	Centre autonomy and accountability	Autonomy Education evaluation policies	1. Low autonomy and bureaucracy. 2. Curriculum and external evaluation
4. Educational equity	Inclusive education and pedagogical diagnosis	Focus on learners Labels and opinions	1. Educational equity in the student body 2. Labelling and equity

Note. Own elaboration.

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Phase I. Data collection instruments and participants

The sources and techniques explore in depth the possible factors that are relevant in each context, with a particular focus on semi-structured ethnographic interviews with key informants and education policy documents and reports, relevant in each case, also taking into account the profile of the people interviewed.

The fieldwork forms part of a national research project on “New educational policies for equity”, the scope of which extends beyond the remit of this article. We proceeded to analyse legislation, governmental and scientific reports, and initiated the semi-structured interview process. The interviews are conducted on a theoretical sampling basis in different provinces: Almeria, Granada, Malaga and Seville. One researcher and 3 researchers from the universities of Almeria and Malaga are taking part.

In terms of conditions, we selected eleven interviewees (8 men and 3 women) during the year 2020, in a Case Study, in which they stand out for their character of commitment and innovation. The selection of key informants is based on the input of the project’s supporting partners, individuals affiliated with institutions, professional networks, trade unions and social collectives, who participate as partners in the research.

The specific objectives of this article are threefold: firstly, to describe the processes of pupil selection in groupings in different schools as well as within schools; secondly, to understand these processes; and thirdly, to transfer this understanding to other contexts. In addition, the article considers the relationship between school autonomy and accountability, and finally, it assesses educational equity.

Interviews

The key information collection strategy is the semi-structured interview, using contextualised and individual data (Flick, 2015). To this end, we investigated a number of thematic areas for interviews and a context questionnaire for the interviewees. The aim of our research requires in-depth interviews, which should resemble ethnographic studies and extensive case studies (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023).

Participants selected for data collection

Table 2

Interview participants

Workplaces	Posts	Fictitious names	Interview codes
1. Centre Ed. Private primary school, Secondary School (IES) and Teacher Training Centre (CEP).	Music teacher, IES teacher in Geography and History, sociolinguistics advisor, Head of Studies and Vice-Director.	BLAS	B (E.8)
2. Educational Guidance Team (EOE) and CEP.	Teacher in therapeutic pedagogy, Special educational needs (SEN) counsellor.	CARMEN	C (E.10)
3. University and Union Administration.	Administrator, Secretary General and Organising Secretary.	EMILIO	E (E.5)
4. Early Childhood Education Centre, Residential Schools and Trade Union.	Teacher in Early Childhood Education and in Residential Schools. Policy Secretary and Secretary General of the Teaching Federation.	FERNAN DO	F (E.4)

5. Primary School, EOE, Educational Administration.	Teacher of compensatory education and Inspector .	JORGE	Jo (E.6)
6. HEI, University, and Educational Administration.	IES Professor in Chemistry and University Professor in Mathematics, Head of Service and Senior Lecturer .	JOHN	J (E.3)
7. IES	Teacher of Secondary Education in Geography and History .	LUIS	L (E.11)
8. Infant School, and Primary School.	Infant school teacher and Primary school teacher .	SEA	M (E.9)
9. Vocational Training Centre, Educational Administration.	Vocational Teacher, Director, Inspector and Senior Officer .	PACO	P (E.1)
10. Rural centres and CEP.	Primary School Teacher and Primary School Counsellor.	SARA	S (E.7)
11. Primary School and Educational Administration.	Primary School Teacher, Director, Inspector, Head of Service and Senior Officer .	TOMÁS	T (E.2)

Notes. We highlight in bold their most recent jobs. Own elaboration.

Governmental, legislative and scientific documents

Educational policy texts, lacking the mark of authorship, create an effect of truth and objectivity, as well as having a rhetorical intention, in the sense of seeking adherence and compliance, hiding their ideological implications (Pini, 2010).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) engages in the critical examination of legal documents and educational policies established by different bodies, mainly educational legislation in Spain and different international and regional IOs. The objective is to contrast and examine the implications of equity.

Phase II. Data analysis

Data analysis is a crucial aspect of the qualitative research process, yet it is frequently neglected in research methodologies and literature. The conceptualisation of categories is a process of making decisions about aspects that are elaborated in a particular context, with its methodological background, research design, research settings, and the practical aspects of its study. This has implications at all stages, as it necessitates the formulation of coding decisions within the context of a study that both collects and generates new categories related to the objectives (Elliott, 2018). The categories and codings provide an overview of the data, facilitating comprehension of the research domains.

Truthfulness

In qualitative research, it would be erroneous to discuss the concept of validity in general and theoretical terms. However, it is essential to demonstrate the consistency of the argumentation within the context of the study. In research, the primary threats arise from the expectations and biases of the researcher and the effect we have on the study. Strategies that can be employed to mitigate threats include the use of triangulation, which can reduce the risk of discrepancies in interviews, the critical judgement of researchers, and the checking and review of participants (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023).

4. Results

4.1. Exogenous privatisation of schools and free choice policies

Differentiation of centres by ownership

The separation between upper-middle class educational environments is reproduced in most of the private-certified schools: “Firstly, because of where they are located, in city centres, in affluent upper-middle class neighbourhoods. And secondly, because a series of requirements are established, of quotas, theoretically voluntary, to which disadvantaged families cannot have access” (P. p3). The power structures are practically against diversity and pluralism, and it is the government’s education policies that privilege subsidised education and are a source of concern within the public sector:

The issue is not only that there should be subsidised education, but also that there should be public schools for those students who we do not want to go to subsidised education [...] A private sector in education with very important elitist connotations is being promoted. Centres where two or three languages are taught, supranational baccalaureates... (P. p1-9)

The problem in schooling is always in the big cities. No one aspires to create a school in a small town. The reasons again are elitist: These centres were created so that the children who were in the Green Cross could cross the street and not go to the Marists, so that they would not mix with the children of the former pupils. (I. p16)

Privatisation through charter schools

Juan (senior official) understands that charter schools are a way of regulating subsidies to public schools and that they are designed exclusively for compulsory education. However, for some years now we have been witnessing an increase in private subsidised education in post-compulsory education.

With the LOGSE (1990), charter schools entered Compulsory Secondary Education, because it was an extension of general education (14-16 years). With the LOE (2006), autonomy was given to the Autonomous Communities (CCAA) (art. 116.4) and the second cycle of Pre-school Education (3-6 years) is introduced, with non-compulsory and free concerts (art. 15 LOE). “What transpired? A previously unchallenged norm was violated. Almost all the communities had begun to introduce the norm generalising the pre- and post-compulsory education” (J. p12 and 13).

Zoning and the single district

The single district has been the way used in communities such as Madrid and Valencia to facilitate the expansion of the state-subsidised system. The Andalusian Minister of Education suggested this possibility, although the proposal was later extended so that there would be at least one private school in all schooling zones, extending the area of influence for private schools (art. 9.4 Schooling Decree 2020). This regional legislation is in contravention of the LOMLOE (art. 86.1), which proposes the same perimeter for public and private schools. “It would be to put in new districts so that everyone could have the choice of a state-subsidised centre. It is the only way they have seen possible for the concerted action to grow” (P. p15).

Growth should always be in the public sector, because it is a public service that must be financed with public funds. Nevertheless, the management of grant-aided schools has more capacity and more organisational power. “The 2011 Decree stipulated that any parent would have centres in both networks. This means that the areas are not

equal, the centres are divided into zones and the influence of the subsidised centre is the whole locality. The private centre has a larger area with greater independence” (J. p16). Moreover, from LOE to LOMLOE (art.108.4): “The public service provision of education shall be carried out through public and subsidised private schools” (J. p18).

Social demand and choice

The criteria for school choice and schooling areas are not equitable. In the Andalusian Schooling Decree, the priority criteria are assigned the following scores: Proximity to home and workplace (14), siblings enrolled (14) and annual per capita income (4 to 0.5). Conversely, the ownership of private grant-aided schools circumvents the admission procedures. “The differentiation between schools has a direct impact on inequalities, as it creates a system of first and second-class schools (...) there were schools, especially on the Andalusian coast, where 60% of the students were immigrants, yet there were no translators. The issue at hand is no longer one of immigration, but rather the discrimination faced by students from certain backgrounds” (F. p6).

For Fernando, the notion of freedom of choice is antithetical to the concept of academic freedom, understood as academic freedom for teachers and schools. “They advanced the notion that freedom of education equates to the freedom to choose a school based on religious ideology. It is logically all a lie ... because it is only for the common prestige” (Jo. p14).

There is also a rejection of public education due to the selection of pupils, rather than a more equitable distribution of pupils, and the fact that state-subsidised education is actually subsidiary to public education: “I know of schools that have told you that if your child continues here, he/she will fail and have to repeat, so you’d better take him/her to the school across the street where the level is lower (F.p11). ““I said (at the beginning), the private centres that we are building are complementary to the system, but what sports facilities, what laboratories do the Marists have? And which public school has them? (F. p13).

Free education and fees

The Order on charter schools (2020) explicitly states that education is free of charge for compulsory education and for pre-school children between the ages of three and six. But the LOMLOE itself (art.117.9) stipulates the maximum amount of fees that schools with a special agreement may impose on families. “The new schooling continues to exacerbate the existing divide between these two public networks...schools illegally charge parents..., which they camouflage through a foundation for educational purposes. Every trip to the museum, extracurricular activities or remedial teaching is paid for” (Jo. p13).

In the 2023-2024 school year, 87% of grant-aided schools imposed a monthly fee on families for the provision of compulsory education. A total of 330 centres in eight Autonomous Communities were analysed, with the highest average amounts in Catalonia (214.5 euros), the Community of Madrid (129.1 euros) and the Basque Country (99.6 euros). The aforementioned fees are somewhat lower in the Valencian Community (82.9 euros), Andalusia (53.1 euros), Murcia (52.9 euros), Galicia (47.6 euros) and Aragon (41.3 euros) (Garlic B2B, 2024).

4.2. The importance of academic groupings

Premature Itineraries (PDC, FPB and FP)

The allocation of students to different educational pathways (tracking) influences equity or inequality depending on how they are organised: tracking in Europe starts from the age of 10 to 16, the latter being very common in education systems. They also depend on the degree of differentiation of pathways (Eurydice, 2021). The first pathway takes place in the third and fourth year of Compulsory Secondary Education from the age of 14, where pupils with learning difficulties can follow the Curriculum Diversification Programmes (PDC). Basic Vocational Training is another pathway offered after the third year (15 year-olds) in which the Compulsory Secondary Education Graduate (GESO) is also obtained.

The pathways in the LOMCE also started in the third and fourth year creating two tracks. These pathways were a failure of the education system, before the LOGSE, the worst performers went to VET and the best went to Bachillerato. The VET has not been afforded the value it merits. It appears to be regarded as the inferior option, with those who are not inclined to pursue further studies ultimately opting for it". (J. p22). "The experience we have of anticipating itineraries is counterproductive and serves no purpose" (Jo. p21).

Bilingualism

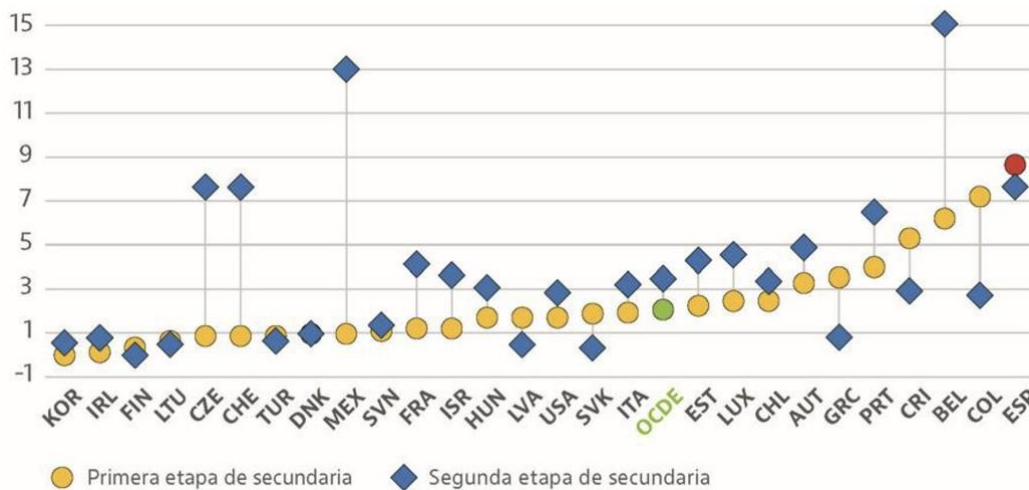
One of the most significant challenges associated with bilingualism is segregation: "The formation of bilingual and non-bilingual groups results in the creation of ghettos. In primary school they do function as a complete centre, but then in secondary school they separate... the profile of bilingual students is characterised by high academic achievement, belonging to a middle class background and a family concerned about education" (B. p15). It is also an obstacle to distinction that has an impact on learning in the subjects themselves. "I have attended classes of Social Sciences or Knowledge of the Environment... and what knowledge, if what interested me was how to pronounce, or how to say such and such a word" (L. p14).

Repetition of the course

Repetition is a pervasive practice that leads to failure and early school leaving (ESL). Spain has one of the highest percentages of pupils repeating a year, with consequences for motivation, expectations and underachievement.

Graph 2

Percentage of repeaters in the first and second stages of secondary education



Note. Adapted from OECD (2023).

In this sense, the interviewees insisted on the same idea:

The problem is that in Spain this debate about automatic promotion is a fallacy. Spain is the country with the highest rate of grade repetition, and repetition is the least profitable; students are worse off when they repeat grades. (T.p11)

The idea still prevails that students who do not have some knowledge must fail, and that students who do not have some knowledge must fall by the wayside. (M. p25)

4.3 Mechanical models of teaching

Autonomy of the centres

According to the Eurydice report (2021) the autonomy of schools in Europe is limited so as not to have a negative impact on equity, which could mean for schools a differentiation in the quality of schooling [sic]. Organisational, curricular and financial autonomy is given to the authorities in order to standardise education. “First of all, it seems to me that autonomy has been granted on paper, but not in reality. In other words, if we give autonomy to the centres, we give it to them for everything. And we really thought that it could be attractive, that is, that a school is able to create and make its own educational project” (F. p8).

The approaches from the administration are reiterated, “because we have sinned of too much dirigisme and concreteness in the rules” (T. p7). As Jorge and Fernando point out, the system itself also swallows them up. “I don’t think they don’t have autonomy, the system is so flawed or the management teams are so conditioned that they don’t make a move without calling the inspector on the phone” (Jo. p16). However, Sara, Blas and Luis, all teachers, do not see autonomy anywhere and have to refer to a compulsory curriculum that tells you how to think and how to feel. Culture becomes routine under regulation.

Educational standardisation and evaluation policies

Centralised curricula have been the norm as bureaucratic procedures for controlling education and have led to rote and unintelligible knowledge. The new curriculum proposes, as a novelty, a defence of content centred on the basics, reinforcing the subjects of Language, Mathematics and Science in order to acquire skills and

instrumental competences, as well as to develop specific jobs: “The neoliberal ideology wants education systems to prepare us in specific competences so that we understand science, mathematical algorithms... while social, artistic and humanistic knowledge is undervalued” (Jo. p19).

In IOs such as Eurydice (2023) or the OECD (2023), and in various publications (Verger and Parcerisa, 2017), it seems that student performance benefits from policies of school autonomy and school accountability (sic). However, as García (2022) points out, educational policies must consider the extent to which the assessments they propose serve to improve what they evaluate. Evaluation will only be meaningful according to how it is used: if it is used for comparison or to identify the best teacher, it will not be useful for improving the aspects being evaluated. “It is considered that schools should be accountable, but from a culture of evaluation that is not punitive but formative; as well as an evaluation of the education system itself, of all the professionals and institutions involved” (B. p16). “(...) if it does not become an evaluation, which becomes an evaluation of who is the best, then it ceases to be valid” (C. p27).

PISA is a form of assessment that serves as a model for national assessments.

The LOMLOE is very interested in external evaluations, both the annual census evaluations with improvement plans (diagnostic tests), of the CCAA (art. 21, 29), and the evaluations of the education system (art. 143), with a sample character, every two years, which centralise and standardise the curriculum.

4.4. The equity issue

The first draft of the LOMCE stated that the fundamental aim of the education system was to train people who would be useful to the production system. This is a radical ideological turn towards all the current neoliberal economic policies. “We have always believed that the education system is a tool to facilitate the social advancement of social classes; to favour those people who are not discriminated against because of their socio-cultural, economic or residential characteristics” (Jo. p8). Educational inequality policies have proliferated over the last thirty years (European Union, 2015 and OECD, 2017).

Educational policies still focus on the student, and labelling and pedagogical diagnosis are not conducive to improving contexts and inclusion.

The moment I admit that I have to diagnose you in order to know what your needs are, I take you, I look for you and I put you in a different place from the usual one, I already assume that the problem is yours” (C. p20). “Of course, the moment you divide and separate, you break equity. You end up with ghettos, because the policies I’m seeing are going in that direction. (I. p7)

In this line we can analyse Blas’ secondary school, where different strategies are used to reduce school dropout. For example, in the 1st ESO (compulsory secondary education) they work by areas, they avoid taking students out of the classroom and segregation, they have support within the reference classroom, double teaching, interactive groups, tutored libraries... However, the “Programa de Acompañamiento Escolar de Andalucía” favours the labelling of pupils by separating them from the regular classroom. “In PROA, the classes are in the afternoon..., well, I’ve never seen an interesting project, an interesting activity, it’s just a repetition of what happened in the morning” (B. p18).

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this research we have explored the political and practical arguments and criteria for developing stratification and standardisation and their impact on educational outcomes and school experiences in achieving educational equity.

Our first finding shows that not all countries behave in the same way: there are differences between countries that resist school stratification based on comprehensive, pluralistic and supportive education systems in the classroom, such as the Nordic countries, which favour equity, while school segregation increases in Central Europe, where students are separated at an early age with differentiated pathways and curricula, and with greater differentiation in Anglo-Saxon countries that separate students within classrooms (Páimies and Castejón, 2015). In Canada, for example, such forms of grouping have been developed over several decades and have been shown to have negative effects on the academic performance of students assigned to lower pathways. It also reinforces social stratification by income, race and ethnicity. (Maharaj and Zareey, 2022).

In Spain, compensatory strategies that involve the separation of students from the mainstream group (curricular diversification, learning improvement programmes, different mechanisms for school reinforcement, etc.) are used, in contrast to countries such as Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland, where individualised attention methods, teacher support in the classroom, early prevention of difficulties and non-separation of students to achieve their integration prevail (Save the Children, 2017).

In our second finding, we can affirm that student separation policies lead to relatively high levels of segregation (Dronkers et al., 2011), while showing the relationship between stratification and lower equity. Pupils who are segregated have less access to the educational system, have less influence from their peers (with whom they learn), and experience schools with fewer resources and opportunities. Socially mixed schools are more advantageous, as PISA advocates. The main effect of lower educational attainment does not come from individual social background, but from the aggregation of students from similar social backgrounds in the same school (García-Huidobro, 2009).

A third important finding is how stratification leads to a selection of the wealthier classes, where homogeneous groupings by household income level converge. The most advantaged environments account for 65% of the subsidised education system, which serves only 8% of the least advantaged (BBVA, 2019). In addition, the lack of educational attention falls on public schools, which mainly enrol students from lower socio-economic and cultural levels. Specifically, policies of privatisation and student selection, contrary to equity, make Spain the country with the third highest number of ghetto schools out of 64 countries and the one that segregates students most according to family income (OECD, 2021).

We also note that school choice policies, which are subject to family demand, together with privatisation, contribute most to the social divide. They turn families into clients of the education system by reinforcing school choice as a right, to the detriment of the most vulnerable. School choice, differentiation and competition between schools, educational pathways and high repetition rates have a proven impact on school failure and inequity.

In the fourth finding, the culture of standardisation of assessment, in terms of content and what can be measured by tests, functions for Sousa (2017) as a new colonialism of the global agenda or a control mechanism that, far from training and improving

education, develops competitive assessment systems. Since the end of the 1990s, under the pressure of New Public Management (NPM), the OECD has become a strategy for modernising education and making it more efficient. It constitutes a form of 'governance' characterised by autonomy, accountability, private sector management techniques and freedom of school choice (Oliveira, 2022; Verger and Normand, 2015).

With the introduction of accounting, there is a greater focus on outputs, the development of a demand-driven clientelist system rather than on substantive needs (vouchers, choice of school...) and the introduction of competitive funding strategies that benefit the best schools, the wealthiest families and societies. It becomes a technocratic management of education that sends very explicit messages about the schooling model through the indicator system.

A fifth finding shows us how different studies highlight that educational inequalities are conditioned by the structure of school systems in terms of differentiation, rather than by the inequalities of society; schools themselves not only reproduce but also reinforce school and social inequalities by placing young people in central spaces as opposed to others considered peripheral (Pàmies and Castejón 2015). Clusters create school resistance and build trajectories of failure (Pàmies, 2013).

Now the school project, as a component of a civic ethic and the development of social values for democratic coexistence, is broken with the retreat of the public sphere, the only guarantee of access and development of a plural life. The educational policies of competitive autonomy have the complicit acceptance of a section of society which, in defending selective education, puts its individual interests (parents, teachers and the ecclesiastical hierarchy), before the social interests of a comprehensive, plural, critical, secular and democratic education. School is no longer a promise of future employment, or at least of social differentiation, but the middle and upper classes strive to maintain this goal for themselves (Van Zanen, 2015). School choice, which is a social choice sought by the upper and middle classes, is covered as an individual right. A demand from families that is duly managed and normalised by educational policies in Spain (Viñao, 2016).

The sixth finding shows us very clearly that privatisation has been expanding very rapidly in Andalusia over the last decade or so. In fact, from 2019 to 2024, with the Popular Party government, 1943 school units have been eliminated in public schools and in the 2023-2024 academic year alone there will be 486 fewer classes in Infant and Primary schools, maintaining and expanding the subsidised units. While the budget for charter schools for 2024 exceeds 1 billion euros (Ustea, 2023).

We must bear in mind that 75% of the population lives in the municipalities of large and medium-sized cities, and that this is where subsidised education exists and is most profitable. In 82% of the municipalities there is none, nor have they ever been interested in it (CGT, 2019). The education employers only set up schools where they do business, "the business is not so much economic as ideological and indoctrination" (F.p9). For example, in provincial capitals such as Granada, 60 % of pupils are enrolled in state-subsidised schools, followed by Cádiz and Málaga with more than 50 %, Seville, Córdoba and Huelva with more than 40 %, and the rest Almería and Jaén with more than 30 %.

The hypothesis remains open, the focus of school failure is still on the pupils and the family environment, thus perverting the ultimate meaning of education, as shown by the OECD (2023), Eurydice (2021) and Word Bank (2023) reports on equity, which show the negative effects of grouping pupils, standardisation, competitive assessments, repetition of grades, labelling... without proposing other models of schooling.

Our reflections intervene in the limitations imposed by governments and IOs themselves, which ensure unequal representation in education according to income levels, the lack of educational attention according to needs, and policies of privatisation and selection of students that go against social justice. Educational policies sometimes respond to standardised solutions formulated by experts or made for problems that are not necessary. The consequences are domestication into reproductive models of knowledge that do not question economic, political and social frameworks.

We also reflect on the contributions of this study, which are primarily aimed at equity, formulated through democratic ideas and equality. The expansion of school coverage in countries such as Latin America will only be possible if it is accompanied by economic growth strategies and investment in schools, by modifying the curriculum and increasing teachers' salaries. Equity in education is achieved through pluralistic schools that represent the whole of society. Schools that are free from particular ideologies, that educate for the common good, that foster commitment and social cohesion, with fundamental rights for all students.

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