Informed Discourses to Tackle Educational Inequalities: Three Premises to Articulate the Spanish Agenda

Discursos informados contra las desigualdades educativas: tres premisas para articular la agenda española

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Abstract

Addressing inequalities in schools is a crucial element of European education policy. Approaches to this phenomenon vary considerably, both in the definition of the problem and in the implementation of initiatives. However, little is known about how those who influence educational policy understand and perceive school inequality. This article examines the discourses of key stakeholders engaged in tackling school inequality in Spain in the aim to identify the frameworks, both conceptual and pragmatic, that articulate their understanding of educational inequalities. Drawing on this qualitative approach, three distinct dominant premises are revealed: going beyond formal equality and moving toward a social justice perspective; addressing inequality from a relational framework, considering factors both inside and outside of school; and understanding inequality as a dynamic and cumulative process that requires a preventive approach. Overall, the article contributes to shedding light on the complex interplay between perspectives and strategies as a key process for understanding educational inequalities considering the linked ecologies specific to each country.

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Resumen

Abordar las desigualdades en las escuelas es un elemento crucial de la política educativa europea. Los enfoques hacia este fenómeno varían considerablemente, tanto en la definición del problema como en la implementación de iniciativas. Sin embargo, se sabe poco sobre cómo entienden y perciben la desigualdad escolar quienes influyen en la política educativa. Este artículo analiza los discursos de actores clave involucrados en la lucha contra la desigualdad escolar en España, con el objetivo de identificar los marcos, tanto conceptuales como pragmáticos, que articulan su comprensión de las desigualdades educativas. A partir de este enfoque cualitativo, emergen tres premisas dominantes distintas: ir más allá de la igualdad formal y avanzar hacia una perspectiva de justicia social; abordar la desigualdad desde un marco relacional, considerando factores tanto internos como externos a la escuela; y entender la desigualdad como un proceso dinámico y acumulativo que requiere de un enfoque preventivo. En conjunto, el artículo contribuye a arrojar luz sobre la compleja interacción entre perspectivas y estrategias como un proceso clave para comprender las desigualdades educativas, considerando las ecologías específicas vinculadas a cada país.

Palabras clave: política educativa, medidas de equidad, desigualdad educativa, discursos informados, promulgación de políticas.

INTRODUCCIÓN

The analysis of educational inequalities is not new and it has always been linked to the structure and functioning of educational systems, with no system entirely free from such disparities (Dupriez & Dumay, 2006). The nature and impact of inequalities is nonetheless dynamic and changes over time. Scholars have traditionally focused on unequal access to educational and socioeconomic resources (Verhoeven, 2011). More recently, the concept of educational inequalities has expanded to include issues related to recognition, power relations, school practices, curriculum, and emotional and affective dimensions (Lynch et al., 2021).

This paper illustrates the informed-expertised discourses on actions against educational inequality. The objective is to identify common premises for understanding this complex phenomenon and, ultimately, the policies and initiatives conceived in the Spanish setting to address it. The term premise is understood here as "theories of change" (Pawson & Tilley, 1997); that is, comprehensive descriptions of how and why changes are

expected to occur. Therefore, assuming that social interventions are based on specific conceptions about the phenomenon they target, the premises must be understood both as analytical frameworks and as sets of proposals derived from them.

This research has been developed in the frame of the European project PIONEERED (Ref. GA-No 101004392).[3] We have learned that educational inequalities are conceptualised differently across national contexts, convergent and divergent elements arise in institutional settings, and the implemented initiatives are consequently diverse (Jobst et al., 2022). As a result, we argue that it is necessary to consider specific national environments and unveil the specific political and practical framework for addressing educational inequality. To this end, rather than presenting comparative European results, we analyse the narratives of key stakeholders regarding the educational policy agenda to address socio-educational inequalities in the Spanish context. This approach allows identifying specific common premises that articulate the strategic initiatives, from a theoretical and practical perspective, to promote social justice in education.

In the next section, we review the understanding of inequalities from a European perspective, highlighting the main aspects that configure educational inequality and the leading intervention trends. Then, we briefly present the Spanish educational system and its model of policy enactment and interventions. After the methodological section, which provides details on the sample selection criteria and the analytical strategy, the results are structured around three premises: beyond the equality approach, overcoming the inner-outer duality, and addressing the accumulation of (dis)advantages from a preventive perspective. For each premise, the conceptual debate is identified and, whenever possible, the main associated interventions. Finally, the results are discussed and summarised, highlighting the continuities and overlaps between them.

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[3] For more information visit the project website (https://www.pioneered-project.eu/).

1. UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Inequalities, deeply rooted in the European education systems, are central to determining individual and collective levels of success throughout the life cycle and, consequently, the quality of life. Previous empirical research concludes that educational inequality is an intrinsically complex, multifaceted and multicausal phenomenon (Leivas, 2019). It adopts diverse forms—often linked to social class, gender, ethnicity and functional diversity— and emerges throughout educational trajectories (access, process and result), crossed by a multiplicity of factors inside and outside the educational system (Benz et al., 2021). Further, educational inequalities evolve processually over the life-course, shaped both by the institutional and social context in which students find themselves (Reay et al., 2001). Recent studies, based on systematic and comparative reviews, reaffirm the complexity and multifaceted nature of inequalities in education, involving many interrelated and interconnected variables; a circumstance that helps to understand why educational inequalities remain a considerable challenge throughout Europe (Kampylis et al., 2024).

This heuristic and processual approach of inequality is based on the understanding that educational (dis)advantages are accumulated throughout the academic trajectories to focus on temporarily and categorically defined disadvantages (Keister & Southgate, 2022). This vision overcomes the historically limited perspective of educational inequality focused on access and agglutinates the discussion of inequalities on processes (absenteeism, repetition and (dis)engagement with the school) and results (academic performance and early school leaving). However, while countries like Spain, Germany and Switzerland focus on the opportunities and unequal treatment of disadvantaged students, Norway balances outcomes through unequal treatment approaches and Finland opts for unequal treatment as a form of positive discrimination (Jobst et al., 2022). Educational inequalities are also structured along different axes, such as gender or social origin, but specific disadvantages arise where these axes intersect (Codiroli Mcmaster & Cook, 2019) and operate interrelated in micro, meso or macro levels. This perspective highlights the need for an anticipatory and multi-level approach. As Barrenechea et al. (2023) highlight, there is a

need for a systemic framework to support education, focusing on aspects such as governance, teacher quality, and the evaluation of educational practices. This contribution emphasises the intricate interplay between approaches and strategies as a crucial process for understanding educational inequalities across national contexts.

Overall, despite a shared commitment to equity, European countries vary widely in their approaches, reflecting different understandings of the right to education and policy implementation (Benz et al., 2021; Jobst et al., 2022). Public education policies emerge from dynamic and diverse interactions among the state, experts, and civil society. However, some policies are designed in a rather top-down, institutional manner, which may undermine their sustainability, legitimacy, and effectiveness (Calderón, 2019). Additionally, the notion of the right to education often operates as a significant gap in the discursive field of educational policy (Ruiz, 2015). Structural reforms at the macro level, such as fundamental educational reforms and the redefinition of new educational (sub)tracks (Rambla & Fontdevila, 2015), coexist with targeted interventions at the meso and micro levels. These include measures to reduce the financial cost of education, improve access and permeability, and, especially in upper-secondary education (Nylund, 2012), bring academic and professional tracks closer. Others are focused on preventing and mitigating phenomena such as school segregation or ESL (Eurydice, 2024); offering specific forms of schooling for disadvantaged students—such as the Roma community and newcomer students—(Jacovkis et al., 2022); and transforming schools through inclusive schooling models and enriched curricular experiences (Coll, 2018).

In the context of the Spanish educational system, the periodic report of Eurydice (2024) offers a comprehensive set of policy recommendations to promote equity, improve educational quality, and support a decentralised-adaptable administration conforming to European standards. In line with the objectives of this contribution and the premises identified, specific guidelines are suggested to support students, particularly from disadvantaged contexts, to ensure equal opportunities and reduce educational disparities. Further, the report stresses the need to promote a perspective of social justice, beyond formal equality, advocating for genuine equity to ensure the conditions for educational success for all.

2. ECOSYSTEMS AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN SPAIN

The tendency to promote initiatives to enhance equity and address social and educational inequalities emphasises a competency-based curriculum designed to address student diversity, reduce learning gaps, and promote equitable access to essential knowledge (Coll & Martin, 2021). This dynamic has run parallel to an evolving legislative educational framework (Alonso et al., 2023). The LOMLOE (2020) presents an opportunity to transform the education system toward a more competency-based approach, focused on essential learning and greater autonomy for schools, all within a framework of inter-administrative collaboration. Likewise, inclusion and equity are treated as key guiding principles in this process of curricular modernisation. Coll and Martin (2021) suggest that a competency-based curriculum must be designed to address student diversity, reduce learning gaps, and promote equitable access to essential knowledge. But several particularities should be considered to understand the configuration of educational inequalities in the Spanish context.

Overall, policies to tackle educational inequalities have been highly fragmented and disconnected (Gallego et al., 2018). Nowadays there is not a centralised line of proposals and, in a scenario with almost none large-scale public policies, multiple and micro-scale interventions (mainly local) tend to be enacted. Bonal and Bellei (2018) suggest that, in decentralised contexts like Spain, the proliferation of potentially innovative, but local, initiatives suffers from a lack of coordination and common evaluation. Accordingly, a diaspora of unconnected grassroots interventions constitutes the basis to approach educational inequalities. Spain also fosters highly context-dependent and discontinuous-sporadic interventions, leading to fragmented and marginalised political discussions regarding their essence. Many interventions are sporadic, lack sustained implementation, and depend largely on local contexts. This circumstance can be explained by educational reforms designed, according to Verger and Curran (2014), to respond to contingent pressures and the political logic of the moment rather than to long-term strategic planning. Consequently, in this complex and unique context, contributions like this acquire greater significance.

Accounting for the architecture and configuration of the Spanish educational system, three additional aspects must be considered. First, the coexistence of formal comprehensiveness in lower compulsory secondary education, with common schooling up to the age of sixteen; and high rigid-

ity and very low permeability between itineraries in upper non-compulsory secondary education. Second, a double circuit of professional-academic post-compulsory education that has historically been developed under different conditions (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2022), and which has resulted in the devaluation of Vocational Education and Training (VET). And third, a high persistence of grade repetition and ESL, unequally distributed among social groups and with considerable impact on school experiences and success opportunities (Tarabini et al., 2021). Besides, there is a formal and non-formal education, being the latter somehow residual and, although in recent years there has been a tendency to move to a more holistic scenario, educational policies and practices continue to be oriented towards formal school education (Alonso-Carmona et al., 2022).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As noted above, this research is part of the European H2020 project PIONEERED, aimed at identifying pioneering policies and practices to tackle educational inequality in nine member states (Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain and Switzerland). The methodological design follows a sequential approach, combining qualitative methodologies to identify the stakeholders' discourses. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and workshops, we explored the prevailing conceptions of educational inequalities, and the interventions to address them (Jobst et al., 2025). The approach shifts the focus from individual/organisational to collective perspectives, underlining the main divergences and convergences among the informants. While, the multi-method and multi-perspective approach (Mik-Meyer, 2020) was replicated in all nine national contexts, this contribution concentrates on delving into the particularities of the Spanish stakeholders' discourses.

The data was obtained from eight in-depth interviews, two focus groups and two online workshops with policymakers, gatekeepers and practitioners, and academics. As shown in table 1, the sample included stakeholders affiliated to both formal and non-formal education, and with experience in different stages of the educational system and a diversity of vulnerable groups. As for policymakers, the interest lies in their position as decision-makers; gatekeepers and practitioners are relevant for their ability to provide informed knowledge; and the expert and critical knowledge

was drawn from academics. All participants explicitly provided their consent, but it was decided to preserve their anonymity to safeguard the integrity and confidentiality of their opinions. Strict adherence to ethical protocols was ensured throughout the research process, including signed informed consent forms, clear explanations of the scope and purpose of the study, and participants' autonomy, including their unequivocal right to withdraw at any stage.

Table 1
List of participants

Interviews		
Participant code	**Institution/Position**	**Category**
E1	Centre for Educational Innovation and Research	Policymakers
E2	Non-profit organisation (social and economic innovation)	Gatekeepers and Practitioners
E3	Non-profit organisation (education)	Gatekeepers and Practitioners
E4	Non-profit organisation (education)	Gatekeepers and Practitioners
E5	National Institute of Educational Technologies and Teacher Training	Policymakers
E6	University Complutense of Madrid	Academics
E7	Non-profit organisation (ethnic minority groups)	Gatekeepers and Practitioners
E8	Ministry of Education	Policymakers

Focus Groups			
Focus Group Code	**Participants' institution**	**Thematic Focus**	**Category**
FG1	(N=6) Ministry of Education (x2), Centre for Educational Innovation and Research, Agency for University Quality and Evaluation, University of La Laguna and Autonomous Univer-	Public administration role	Policymakers and Academics

	sity of Barcelona		
FG2	(N=5) Basque Institute for Educational Evaluation and Research, Non-profit organisations (x3), and Spanish network of second chance schools entities	Third sector role and other relevant social and educational agents	Gatekeepers and Practitioners
Workshops			
Workshop Code	Participants' institution	Thematic Focus	Category
W1	(N=6) Ministry of Education, Trade unions (x2), Teaching staff, Non-profit organisation (education) and Vic University	Formal Education	Policymakers, Gatekeepers and Practitioners and Academics
W2	(N=5) Non-profit organisations (x4) (education, social action and ethnic minority groups) and Barcelona University	Non-Formal Education	Gatekeepers and Practitioners and Academics

Source: own elaboration.

The fieldwork allowed the exploration of various facets related to educational inequalities. Following a deductive process and based on the categories of an interview guide, the informants were asked to discuss their understanding of educational inequalities. Additionally, accounting for the evidence compiled in the previous research stages, they were asked to identify emerging dilemmas, contradictions, and tensions. Relevant practices, either present or past, were examined from multiple perspectives (cooperation between actors, interrelation between informal, formal, and non-formal domains, etc.), assessing their effectiveness and identifying the main constraints and challenges. Specifically, school segregation, socioeconomic differences and child poverty, ESL, and young newcomers and Roma students' exclusion, were addressed in the workshop sessions.

The findings were transcribed and analysed through a set of categories based on a systematic manual coding approach without the use of data analysis software. For example, the definition and characterisation of educational inequality, its relevance in public and political agendas, the pivotal areas in which the initiatives are focused, the practices developed (and knowledge acquired) to reduce inequality and, particularly highlighted in

the workshops, the dilemmas and contradictions to address socio-educational inequalities. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that flexibility is an advantage of this analytical approach, which can be used with a wide range of qualitative data sets, fitting in with the idea of the multi method-multi perspective. In this regard, the analytical strategy was based on thematic analysis enabling to identify meanings and patterns underlying the data, as well as detailed descriptions and interpretations of aspects of interest of the research topic.

Finally, the analytical interest lies in the stakeholder's discourses, rather than in its production conditions. We have attempted to understand the discourses and not the subject through the discourse. In this regard, the active involvement of several stakeholders in the discussions resulted in relatively consistent positions and uniform narratives, despite their different positions and backgrounds. Yet, instead of diminishing the value of the information obtained, this circumstance allowed the emergence of consensual general cosmovisions based on specific perceptions, conceptualisations and assessments of the phenomenon. Additionally, descriptive analyses are essential for understanding and summarising data, providing a concise picture of key trends and patterns; a particularly relevant approach in contexts, like the Spanish, in which informed-knowledge is only recently being acknowledged in making informed decisions (MCI, 2022). These enriching dialogues provided a multilevel and holistic understanding of educational inequality, leading towards an agenda more focused on equity, and to collaborative strategies and innovative solutions to reduce educational inequality.

4. RESULTS

The findings are structured around the general cosmovisions of the stakeholders to delineate the dominant frameworks behind the conceptualisation and, consequently, the implemented initiatives to address educational inequalities in the Spanish setting. Three dominant premises, which emerge inevitably interconnected to one another, lay the foundations to the understanding of educational inequalities: moving beyond the equality approach, overcoming the inner-outer duality, and going from a compensatory to a preventive perspective.

4.1 Beyond the Equality Approach

The first conception identified by the stakeholders, which emerges inevitably interconnected with the approaches identified below, refers to the synergies between educational inequalities and, in a broad perspective, the approaches of equality, equity and social justice. The discussion of the stakeholders revolves around issues related to equal access and structural inequalities of the most vulnerable groups. But, while academics and think tanks tend to emphasise the need to guarantee both, the right to education and the rights in and through the educational system, partners with NGOs and policymakers state the need to embrace the so-called positive and negative rights. An example of the latter could be the recognition of the cultural specificities of Roma people and their protection against social prejudice and discrimination.

This perspective is yet overcome from various angles. The stakeholders go beyond the logic of equating the concepts of equal treatment, equal opportunities and equal access to education for all; an approach primarily focused on socioeconomic inequalities and the link between individual merits and *fair* inequalities. Regardless of the existence of formal equality of opportunities and treatment in terms of enrolment, some informants question the statement on the basis of two assumptions. First, equality of access has neither been fully achieved in Spanish post-compulsory education, nor in the context of extracurricular activities; and second, there is differentiated schooling under the same compulsory stage. Consequently, it is agreed that equality of access is something fictitious. They suggest that ensuring equality of opportunities not only disregards less visible barriers leading to initiatives often operating with a deficit view of some social groups, but also enables the legitimisation of inequalities of process and results, underpinning the logic of inequalities determined mainly by student's individual efforts.

> [The] horizontal and functional mobility... does not mean that society has become more egalitarian, nor that the positions are more approximate. Society can become polarised and at the same time be more egalitarian or... sorry, have more equal opportunities... We have not suffered enormous polarisation, like the United States, but neither have we followed a path of reducing inequalities. But that, of course, that's not all either, because one thing is that inequalities are not reduced, and another thing is that those who are worse off are a hundred times better off than they were forty years ago (Interview, E4).

Expanding on the above, although there is consensus regarding the complex-multifaceted nature of educational inequalities, bound to social inequalities, three interrelated positions are identified regarding its role. Academic stakeholders and think tanks tend to assume that educational inequalities are an extension of social inequalities. They emphasise the "decoupling" between school demands and the cultural background held by the vulnerable groups. Informants related with NGOs and policymakers, stress the role socio-economic circumstances play to explain educational inequalities among vulnerable groups.[4] Finally, a minority of informants suggest that educational inequalities could be seen as the origin. The discourse of those who advise that school is the problem, or at least a substantive part of it, brings out tension between deciding how to act from the school to reduce inequalities and to what extent tackling educational inequalities can function as an alibi for not intervening in overcoming social inequalities. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> There are schools that have reversed the situation and schools that have really been the ones that have generated social change, at least in the neighbourhood or in the immediate environment, but they are the least. So, I do believe that the fight for educational inequality must be accompanied, it must also be accompanied by a fight on the social level, very clearly (W2, E4).

The premise of equality and equity is also related to considerations about standardisation and the nature of fairness and social justice. While standardised education can be equal, because each student is expected to meet the same standards and goals as their grade-level peers, stakeholders question whether this can also be equitable. When it comes to social justice, often backed by a commitment to improve conditions for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, they underscore how particular approaches can promote new educational inequalities. The tension between a perspective that implies that each individual or group should receive the same resources and access opportunities (paradigm of equality) and the recognition of how different needs and assets should determine their acquisition—regardless of circumstances, abilities or experiences—to

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[4] Regarding the main vulnerable groups that suffer from educational inequality and social exclusion, there is a great consensus in pointing to those with lower socioeconomic status and ethnic minorities, particularly immigrants and Roma. Women are a group that, although suffering from a clear axis of inequality, is not identified as vulnerable in itself.

achieve an equal result (paradigm of equity) is resolved by the stakeholders in favour of the latter. Educational inequities are framed within a broader system of social inequalities. Consequently, instead of treating everyone equally, everyone should be treated equitably or justly depending on their circumstances. The following quote illustrates these ideas:

> It's just that I think we would be making a mistake if we believed that standardising things would work… From many perspectives, people are not equal, and approaching that from an egalitarianism is a mistake because in the end not everyone has the same starting line. With what really, what we need is to move more towards contexts of equity or paradigm of inclusion and social justice, not so much from an equality perspective. Obviously, the rights must be the same for everyone. But that's another thing…? In the end you will have to adapt, and you will have to start, not giving each one what they want but what they need… how can we reach that context of educational well-being, social well-being, or whatever well-being, from a logic of equity and to dedicate efforts to some things greater than others (W2, E3).

Schools are seen as (re)producers of inequalities but also as agents of change. Stakeholders agree that practices must operate under the principles of social justice, while having a specific focus on the maximisation of opportunities for the most vulnerable. This approach often leads to assuming the need of compensatory actions, an issue further developed below, directed to the less advantaged groups by giving them unequal favourable treatment. In this regard, the testimonies underline the possibility of perverse and/or unintended effects of measures against inequality. For example, as practices of innovation may not incorporate the principle of equity and opportunities for all amongst its goals, they may not only be inequitable, but also may (re)produce inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive changes, among which teacher education emerges as a key transformative element. This is in line with the findings presented by García-García (2024), who underscores the need for a substantive improvement in both initial and continuous teacher preparation, equipping educators to engage with diversity from a more critical and reflective standpoint.

Overall, stakeholders hold a perspective that accounts for a multilevel approach in their analyses and proposals, while often underestimating intersectionality. As a result, the dual role of certain initiatives in both combating and perpetuating inequalities highlights the challenge of pro-

moting universal measures while also advancing more effective initiatives tailored to specific vulnerable groups.

4.2 Overcome the Inner-Outer Duality

Traditional approaches to educational inequality have often been pigeonholed by the pernicious dichotomy; which involves considering school-related (internal) and out-of-school related (external, especially family-related) factors in isolation. Measures inspired by this scheme, according to the stakeholders, are unable to generate significant changes in the distribution of educational opportunities. This is because both educational dimensions run together and feed each other (Calderón, 2019). Stakeholders point out that this rigid cut between school and social factors often leads to the view that the education system cannot act on the latter. This results in fatalistic and paralysing attitudes towards educational change based on presenting school policy and other social policies as mutually exclusive rather than interconnected.

Most stakeholders, especially those more closely linked to academic research, suggest the influence and interdependence between the strategies and attitudes of the students and families, and the internal dynamics of the school system. Against the idea that external inequality is simply reproduced internally, several stakeholders emphasise the role of the school system in the very construction of this inequality (as mentioned in the previous section). The school, through its internal diversification between schools, pathways or more or less prestigious institutions, reinforces a variety of subjectivities and dispositions that different social groups have towards the institution. The testimonies reveal that this leads to a vicious circle, which ends up naturalising and justifying devalued school provision for vulnerable groups that see their initial disadvantages aggravated and internalised. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> I believe that from the end of primary education, well consolidated later in compulsory secondary education and clearly represented in post-compulsory education or in school dropout, we have a different and unequal educational experience that leads to a profound inequality of learning among young people. And I think this is a central element. I think that from a very young age students feel, identify, perceive that they are good or bad for studying, that they are good or bad for some subjects, and this is clearly crossed by gender, social class, ethnic origin and reinforced, stimulated, naturalised by different schools and by different curricular models (FG2, E2).

From these discourses emerge resonances of the critical perspective in relation to the understanding of educational inequality as a product of school judgements: the problem is not outside, but in how the outside is judged inside the school. By assuming school judgements to be neutral, many initiatives for educational change, and more specifically, many anti-inequality approaches to education, have reified the disadvantages of sub-altern groups. As a result, they seem to ignore that these disadvantages exist primarily in the eyes of the specific yardstick of the school culture. This has often led to compensatory approaches, as we will see below, and to measures that have somehow pathologised students from lower back-grounds, presenting their culture as an obstacle. Stakeholders close to this perspective, generally academics, consider that the inclusion and educa-tional promotion of vulnerable students would not be achieved by identify-ing and correcting their alleged deficits. Rather, the changes are more about rethinking the deep-rooted logics in the functioning of the institu-tion, considering its sociocentric biases.

These considerations lead to measures mainly related to pedagogies and teacher recruitment and training. Against the encyclopaedic con-tents and lecture-based transmission, most stakeholders seem to be com-mitted to active pedagogies and flexible and competence-based curricula, which should be adapted to the attributes of students from vulnerable groups. However, the limitations of the approach, regarding current teach-ers training, is one of the most complex challenges faced by the education-al system. As opposed to a homogeneous teaching body with access through competitive examinations, some stakeholders underline the need to make room for other profiles connected to dominated groups. The fol-lowing quote illustrates these ideas:

> For example, I believe that an essential aspect in the progression of women in the educational system has been the feminisation of teaching, as I think anyone can un-derstand intuitively, but it could also be explained in much more detail. And an obvi-ous obstacle for me, in the case of Roma students, is the non-existence of Roma teachers. It is the most subliminal message, but more effective, stonier, that this insti-tution is not for you. And it would be as simple as hiring a certain number of teachers from the Roma community (Interview, E7).

This relational view also implies that, when designing effective measures to alleviate inequality, special attention should be paid to the spaces of intersection between the school and its environment. Stakehold-

ers closer to the practitioner sphere consider this a key issue: affinity between school and vulnerable groups implies transformations on both sides of the equation, with a view to breaking the traditional discontinuity between the two. In this sense, acting on educational inequality would lead to interventions on non-formal education, on the contexts of socialisation and leisure with the peer group or on the relationship with the students' families. Finally, acknowledging the potential paralysing effects of presenting school inequalities from an in versus out dichotomy, several stakeholders underline the role of the school as an agent of social change. These arguments are more common among participants linked to the third sector and to pedagogical innovation, avoiding discourses more focused on the reproduction of social inequalities, which are often associated with academic narratives.

> It is difficult because educational inequality is a manifestation of social inequality. It is an extension of social inequality, but it is visualised in the educational field [...]. But of course, there is no... I mean, it cannot be isolated from social inequality. And, in fact, I believe that there is also more and more evidence that, to a certain extent, acting on the vulnerable community has a positive impact on the educational results of vulnerable students, which are fed back [...]. And in the end, families, the environment, the neighbourhood, what happens there, feeds what happens at school and what happens to the child in particular and vice versa. Children can also be catalysts for things that happen in the neighbourhood, in the family, etc. They can't live ignoring each other (Interview, E1).

While it is agreed that acting on social inequality contributes to mitigating educational inequality, this relationship may also work in the opposite direction. Consequently, as illustrated in the quotation above, successful school learning among vulnerable students could have a positive impact on their contexts and lead to changing the whole environment.

4.3 From Compensatory to Preventive Approach

Regardless of their European national context, stakeholders share a similar understanding of educational inequalities and agree that, to promote equality, education must be considered in its societally embedded context (Jobst et al., 2022). Spanish stakeholders coincide on the need to guarantee conditions of success, in a broad sense of the term, for all students regardless of their social context. They state that reactive

ALEJANDRO MONTES & SUSANA VÁZQUEZ-CUPEIRO. *Informed Discourses to Tackle Educational Inequalities: Three Premises to Articulate the Spanish Agenda.*

17

measures—such as grouping by levels, course repetition or support mechanisms for students with social needs—have become obsolete. Some testimonies go further, mainly academics and members of third sector entities and NGOs, as the following quote illustrates, not only by questioning their legitimacy to tackle inequalities in an effective way, but also suggesting the potential of fostering and amplifying them.

> Before, these programs [to fight against early school leaving] were deployed in the third or fourth year of compulsory secondary education, just before they dropped out. And now it is starting even in the second cycle of primary education because it is a trajectory that you see, that is, you see it little by little… From the first grades of primary school. Because otherwise, when you get to the third or fourth year of compulsory secondary education, it's impossible. It's late and it's impossible. So that's what we're trying to get to the bottom of this, yeah. Because if not, it's something that [the students] will carry all the time, right? (Interview, E1).

The main aspect, at the macrosocial level, that emerges from this premise is the need to guarantee balanced schooling measures that avoid systemic imbalances which maximise individual social inequalities. In this sense, inequality must be understood as a dynamic and cumulative process, allowing the recognition of persistent disparities over time and, if not addressed in time, their tendency to intensify and become interconnected. Recognising the cumulative nature of inequalities also enables us to anticipate their effects and impact on students' academic performance and future opportunities. Furthermore, this perspective promotes a preventive rather than corrective approach, which is more effective in the long term by fostering sustainable strategies to address underlying causes. In this sense, the stakeholders point out that preventing unequal schools and educational environments is more efficient and, in the long run, eludes chronic situations more difficult to reverse. In other words, as exemplified in the following quote, before deploying targeted compensatory interventions, it is essential to ensure that the system, far from reproducing inequalities, generally and universally corrects them.

> There are elements that are purely systemic… of the very structure of the educational system and how it is organised, which tends to favour certain groups and not others. For example, access to 0-3. So, the way in which the system is structured, with few places, for example, in nursery schools, and to whom they are directed [mainly middle classes], means that there is already a selection of the social profile that accesses. And that happens at all stages. In all stages there are elements that are systemic… of

system design. For example, also in the differences in access to high school or VET studies, which have to do with the design of transitions in the system, in which options you give, to whom you give them, how you give them, etc. (Interview, E4).

In parallel, the stakeholders also agree that schools cannot assume a corrective function without support. In line with stakeholders from other European countries, the teaching profession is seen as an important means to combat educational inequality and provide more personalised, need-focused education (Jobst et al., 2022). In short, interventions developed at the meso and micro level—schools and teachers, fundamentally—are necessary and should follow the same equitable and preventive logic. Likewise, attachment, commitment and school bonding are key articulating elements within this premise. Yet the school, and the educational community, should be able to create links while making itself significant for vulnerable groups of students. There seems to be consensus, as shown below, around the position that any intervention, intended to be implemented without consolidating the preventive perspective, will be a "patch" to tackle the problem.

It is essential to link families, the school and the educational community. More when we are seeing all the gaps that exist, not only the educational gap... the social gap, the emotional gap, the digital gap, there are many gaps that in the end [in recent years] have widened and contribute to the creation of the inequalities. Especially if we focus on the concentration of certain vulnerable students, which is the tip of the iceberg. If not, no matter how much intervention is done, there is no way. You must create conditions (FG2, E3).

In short, while prevention is among the agreed strategies, the testimonies also reveal that it is among the most complex challenges faced by the educational systems. This is, on the one hand, due to the limitations of public policies in terms of prevention. This is the central common problem highlighted by stakeholders across European countries, even in social-democratic welfare state countries (Alonso-Carmona et al., 2022), and a relegated priority without scarce resources allocated in the Spanish setting. And, on the other hand, due to the complexity of this field of action, and the lack of directly observable manifestations (assumption of acting before the phenomenon is visible). Nevertheless, to develop a preventive perspective, it is essential to promote a processual vision of educational poli-

cies which generates a progressive and stable improvement in terms of equity.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous studies have emphasised the importance of establishing a co-ordinated institutional framework and a set of strategies with a shared goal: attaining equity in education. The amalgam of multilevel proposals draws on theoretical and, above all, practical understandings of educational inequalities, along with their prioritised areas of intervention. This appears to delineate the contours of an educational policy agenda aimed at expanding educational opportunities for all and mitigating the impact of inequality. From this standpoint, the analysis stemming from expert discourses offers valuable insights to inform future initiatives aimed at enhancing equity within the Spanish educational system. Future studies should examine this subject across Spain's autonomous communities, as these represent a highly diverse socio-educational context with decentral-ised and widely varied interventions.

The articulating premises developed in our analysis are situated with-in a broader European context, where addressing educational inequalities is a pressing and multifaceted concern. The alignment between the three developed principles and the trends identified in the body of European literature (Benz et al., 2021) is evident. In fact, it shows the particular adop-tion and resignification for the Spanish case of the vision disseminated by the working group on ESL of the European Commission (2013), with the promotion of the LOMLOE and its inclusive education framework standing as a clear example of this. In contrast to countries with highly stratified education systems—such as Germany, Luxembourg, and Switzer-land—where stakeholders call for structural reforms to reduce educational inequality, the Spanish case highlights a different approach. Spanish stake-holders emphasise the importance of desegregation, particularly regarding the divide between schools, a division closely linked to social composition. Rather than advocating for structural changes to the education system itself, they underline the need to reorient educational practices to better respond to the needs of children and adolescents, with a particular focus on personalised education (both formal and non-formal). Moreover, the identified premises are progressively permeating ongoing discussions with-

in the sphere of Spanish national educational policy, albeit in an informal and somewhat disorganised manner. In this regard, recent legislative amendments, such as those enacted at reducing grade repetition, addressing school segregation, bolstering vocational training opportunities, and exerting greater control over *free* school choice, serve as examples (PIONEERED, 2021).

The interconnections, continuities, and overlaps observed between the premises presented must also be acknowledged. There are logical relationships, both from a conceptual and practical perspective, providing a partial answer to the complex and multifaceted nature of educational inequality. The aspiration to move beyond access disparities is intricately tied to a relational understanding of educational inequality. Simultaneously, this relational perspective is best comprehended in terms of a process, as the relationship with school culture evolves over the entire educational trajectory. In essence, the elements that make up the core of inequality, such as the relational, cumulative, and process-oriented perspectives, are addressed simultaneously through their specificity, with the articulated premises, and their transversality, acting as connecting threads between the premises. Moreover, although the article primarily focuses on the commonalities among the premises rather than on their differences, their distinct nature generates varying levels of consensus. The premise related to the conceptualisation of inequality appears to evoke the most significant dissent. This finding discloses the importance of an underlying ideological component hidden behind the educational policy agenda, being the *what* and *how* dimensions, directly related to the instruments and strategies, garnering greater consensus among stakeholders.

Likewise, these overlaps allow us to recuperate the dilemmas inherent to Fraser's theory (2020) on the relationship between redistribution and recognition, and raise questions not addressed in this paper such as: to what extent does the debate between internal and external factors neglect pedagogical practices of misrecognition? Or, by focusing on aspects related to recognition (for example, expanding the concept of inequality), are we ignoring how school segregation hinders redistribution at the micro level (resources, pedagogy, teaching experience, etc.)? Resolving these tensions remains an unfinished task for actors committed to the multidimensional promotion of equity in educational systems. Implications beyond the research findings suggest the need to avoid recognising school policy and social policies as isolated and mutually exclusive realms. They should be

approached as interconnected dimensions oriented at pursuing the same objective. This perspective has the potential to enhance both the efficiency and scope of the policies and practices implemented, while also facilitating the realisation and objectives of the relational dimension approach. To sum up, this paper contributes to the international discourse on educational inequality by contextualising key ideas, factors, and potential solutions with the practical aim of transforming educational systems and societies. Through stakeholder insights and comparative analysis, it provides foundational knowledge that enables the transition from diagnosing circumstances to formulating responses at both theoretical and practical levels. Nevertheless, certain aspects—such as how educational actors navigate dilemmas within the scope of professional autonomy—require further examination.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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