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Minority students and equal opportunities in education: Equality as a step towards acquiring full citizenship

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Abstract

Minority students require equal opportunities in education and equity requires an effective path to citizenship for all. This paper analyses quality for minority students during compulsory education (primary and lower secondary levels) in Spain. It covers the EU dimension, and identify tendencies and models that could be helpful in order to design and implement educational policies that guarantee equality for all and effective citizenship beyond discourses. It sets up a common framework to promote discussion, contrast and new research orientations.

Introduction

Education in complex societies no longer corresponds to linear development, in which the school plays a central role, but instead is formed on the basis of polycentric networks, in which educating agents generate multifunctional spaces. Put another way, the basic skills and fundamental knowledge that favour the construction of a cohesive and inclusive society for all no longer exclusively depend on the learning and qualifications obtained through the regulated system. Nowadays, we need to speak of the educative co-responsibility of teachers, educators, families and the media in achieving such learning, of integrated educational proposals, and learning throughout one's entire life.

However, the regulated system continues to exist (whether from inertia or from social needs), consuming most of the resources of educational investment in these societies, and the indicators of youth employment suggest (despite academic inflation) that those people with higher education qualifications obtain better and more stable jobs than the general population as a whole (Niemeyer, 2006). For the time being, study is a slow but secure method guaranteeing quality employment for citizens.

Therefore we should continue to consider the school as a fundamental instrument in promoting equality between citizens. If we can guarantee that the entire population can enjoy quality schooling, we are also guaranteeing equal opportunities for all citizens. But putting this principle into effective practice is not something that can be done by whatever means might be available. Social equality cannot be constructed on the basis of inequality at school. Unequal opportunities in the education system may have a double negative effect. On the one hand, they can generate contexts of intraschool and interschool exclusion. On the other, they can fail to comply with the social objectives of social inclusion and cohesion. Therefore, we need to contemplate equality from this dual perspective: a school that works *for* the equal opportunities of citizens should develop an educational dynamic *with* equal opportunities for those citizens.

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Therefore, the socio-economic and socio-cultural disadvantages of foreign families contributes to these citizens being identified as subjects that need special attention in terms of educational equality in order to maintain high levels of social cohesion. We will be dealing with all of this in this article, the aim being to clarify and systemise data and ideas about measures for educational equality that our system needs if it wants equality for students from foreign families.

In order to do this, we have structured the discourse on the basis of the classic distinction between levels of equality in education: formal equal opportunities, equality of access, equality during schooling, and equality in the processes of accreditation and transition (Tomlinson). In order to declare our intentions, we understand that:

- formal equal opportunities are achieved through regulations that guarantee equality for all citizens in terms of satisfying their right to an education. If these regulations did not exist, then policies to provide opportunities for equality would have no legal foundation.
- equality of access to school centres is achieved through education policies that combat possible undercover processes during enrolment, and which have the effect of *ghettoising* some education centres.
- equality during schooling is achieved when we support the children of foreign families, or those belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities, to acquire the basic skills and fundamental knowledge required of compulsory education in equal conditions to all other students.
- equality in qualifications and transition is achieved when the differences between the school performance of pupils from foreign families and the average population are related to personal and not social and cultural issues, and when access to further education and/or employment occurs without commotion or exclusion.

Analysis

The education of pupils from foreign families in Europe has been studied, as in our own country, from the perspective of their schooling. In general terms, and despite what we could consider a slight improvement, the academic results and school dynamics make it clear that being the child of a foreign family or belonging to an ethnic or cultural minority in Europe involves a disadvantage with respect to a peer that is not.

Evidently, this generic statement leads us to ask what the motives are behind such a panorama. A detailed analysis enables us to reaffirm the hypothesis we presented in the introduction: the loss of quotas of equality between the foreign or minority population is not attributable either to these citizens or to the characteristics of the system, but rather to the imbalance that is the result of the interaction between the two parts, a contingent imbalance that could become structural if measures are not applied to correct the emerging inequality. So, in this section we will be seeking to provide elements that can

throw some light on the diversity of foreign citizens, on the diversity of education policies for equal opportunities in different European countries, and on the state of this equality on each level.

Characteristics of the foreign population in Europe

With respect to differences between foreign citizens, and in relation to equal opportunities policies, we will consider two factors: space and time. Space first leads us to consider differentiating factors derived from cultural characteristics themselves, such as:

- Value and meaning of education and schooling: In accordance with the socialisation processes in the country of origin, we find inter-group and intra-group differences among the foreign or minority population. These differences can be explained on the basis of socio-economic factors (level of income), demographic factors (from urban or rural environments), socio-cultural factors (value of the school in the education of children) and school factors (model and education system) going back to the country of origin, among others (Carrasco, 2004). Applying general measures of equal opportunities without considering this variability may generate inequalities among the foreign population itself: while some may benefit from these measures without needing them, others that may need them more may be getting left behind.
- Academic expectations and future projects: Although hopes for the future may be considered universal, the different strategies that foreign or minority citizens plan to implement may not be. While some groups place great hopes on the education system as being a means for social promotion, others have less faith in it and may even develop resistant attitudes within the educational environment. This is shown in the form of unequal academic results, with some groups of foreigners getting higher results than the average and others getting clearly lower ones (for a study of this paradigm, see the English case – Ofsted, 2006 –). This reality highlights the uncertainties regarding the right to education once the compulsory education period has been completed, and the measures for enjoying equal opportunities beyond said cycle.
- Socio-cultural and economic baggage from the country of origin: Although we should identify the migratory processes of recent decades as mainly being migrations of an economic nature (the number of refugees and the social dynamics around them, as well as the movements of middle and upper middle classes towards Mediterranean shores are in the minority and socially invisible), we need to move away from the monolithic image that identifies the immigrant as being a poor, illiterate person. The diversity in cultural capital and welfare levels displayed by recent arrivals to the European fortress introduces differentiated patterns in terms of attitudes to the school system.

Meanwhile, the consideration of time presents the need to consider the stage of the migratory process in which foreigners find themselves, and whether the citizens we are describing can really be considered foreigners:

- Children of recently arrived families: These pupils require temporary support measures that enable them to be properly included in the education (and, therefore social) system, mainly related here to linguistic aspects and the socio-educational dynamics in the education centre of the society receiving them. The absence of these measures of support may lead to inequality in relation to pupils in general. However, a transformation of this situation from temporary into permanent may in itself constitute a crystallisation of the initial inequality whose elimination had been sought.
- Children of settled families: Being the child or grandchild of foreigners in Europe continues to be a possible discriminatory factor leading to inequality. Ignoring the dynamics of institutional racism in school and social racism in the community may render ineffective all efforts to incorporate measures leading to equal opportunities at school as part of attempts at equality (Carbonell, 2000).
- Children of families that are minorities within the territory: Not being a foreigner but belonging to an ethnic, linguistic and/or cultural minority can also be the source of inequality. Most European countries have moved from the negation of internal cultural diversity to its invisibilisation through generic support policies as a result of the emerging recognition that, curiously, has not been brought about by interior diversity, but rather has come from the exterior. Anyway, the strong link between conditioned education policies and nationality generates the dynamic of the inequality of subjects belonging to minorities, as is the case with the gypsy population in so many countries.

The immediate conclusion we are led to by the preceding analysis is the complexity of managing the principles of an equality-based education policy. Having considered the variety of differentiating data suggested, it seems clear that measures leading to equal opportunities applied in a monolithic way, rather than reducing inequality, can actually increase it. Therefore, as we shall now explain, all education policy for equality that is related to foreigners or minorities needs to be put into context and focused on its own needs, most importantly based not on their ethnic or cultural characteristics, but on their social and economic conditions both in the country of origin and throughout the different stages of the migratory process or in relation to the social majorities.

Educational policies and foreigners in Europe

European countries, in accordance with demographic and social-historic factors, have developed differentiated policies in terms of the education of foreign or minority pupils. On the one hand, the number of foreign citizens existing in each country is a vital factor, as well as their cultural origin, gender and age, as we have said. Meanwhile, we should also consider the tradition of receiving foreign populations in each society. In accordance with all this, we will observe the correspondences between the countries in accordance with what we could call first generation host societies of immigration (France, United Kingdom, Netherlands), and those of second (Belgium, Germany, Austria and Sweden) and third generation (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Finland). In terms of policies for equality in education, each category currently provides:

- *First generation hosts: Reformulation of equality in education policies for foreigners and minorities.* First generation host countries of foreign immigration can be characterised as having implemented measures for equal education of the sons and daughters of these families for several decades (since the fifties and sixties). The general observation, however, is that results are not what had been hoped for, and situations of marginalisation have been detected, in which the feeling of desperation increases. The districts of British people of Indian descent in some English cities, or the high presence of French people of Moroccan or Central African descent in the suburbs of major French cities are good examples of this. States are only concerned about policies regarding foreigners in terms of police control, given that living migratory flow has lesser consequences for society than the presence of nationals of foreign origin. That is why policies that implement measures for equal opportunities have much more to do with the notion of multicultural citizenship than with the condition of being foreign.
- *Second generation hosts. Nationalisation of policies for equality in education for foreigners and minorities.* Second generation host countries of immigrants can be characterised as having begun to receive a large number of foreigners in a simultaneous fashion to the processes of industrial and economic crisis of the seventies and eighties. This circumstance has caused education policies aimed at the foreign population that have stressed a model of integration that does not include the possibility of integration but rather that is based on the myth of a return. Such is the case with the Turkish population in Germany, or the Moroccans in Belgium. We should therefore speak of measures for equality in education that, unexpectedly, have generated the risk of exclusion in a ghettoised social context. These societies currently consider education to be an instrument for the 'cultural re-nationalisation' (and not political re-nationalisation) of groups of foreigners that have been in the country for years and have developed an attitude of cultural resistance due to the treatment they have received as being viewed more as foreigners than citizens. In order to access measures for equal opportunities, foreign citizens must therefore demonstrate knowledge of and attachment to the most valuable symbolic elements of the majority (languages, traditions, values), as a process of preserving a national and monocultural citizenship (which, for consummate reasons, is inexistent and unviable).
- *Third generation hosts. Constitution of policies for equality in education for foreigners and minorities.* Third generation host countries of immigrants, most of which are located in the Mediterranean area, have only experienced the mass arrival of foreigners over the last decade, something which has occurred at the same time as their integration with Europe and the globalised world, their social and economic development, and the inversion of their own migratory flows through a shift from being countries of emigration to countries of immigration. This panorama has taken education systems by surprise, so we can speak here not of a tradition of equality policies, but rather of creation, experimentation and innovation in the promotion of measures leading to equality in education. It

should therefore come as no surprise that in many of these countries we need to speak of short term education measures that often contradict each other. The extraordinary speed of the changes and the need for constant adjustment to new and diverse realities in terms of foreigners means we are looking at a constituting process in relation to the application of measures for equal opportunities. The wide diversity of different origins of pupils in schools and communities means a multicultural model is unviable and so the aim is therefore to rely on educational factors related to the attainment of full intercultural con-citizenship (Fundació Jaime Bofill, 2006).

Despite said differentiating factors that are also the result of time and space factors, a detailed analysis of these different policies enables us to identify in practically all European countries common features in the specific programmes and actions aimed at foreign pupils (in those countries with little history of immigration) or belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities (in those in which intense migratory processes have been occurring for decades). The content of educational programmes for integrating foreign pupils, or those pertaining to ethnic or cultural minorities, is based on three main areas: language and communication, educational orientation and civil education, and occupational and vocational training.

These programmes in themselves explain a biased vision of these pupils, perceived from a perspective of deficit or compensation, and respond to what some authors are already starting to describe as the 'failure of integration'. It is precisely this sensation of failure that envelops first generation host countries of immigrants, and partly those of second generation, that has caused their education systems to be perplexed by the absence of positive results of the policies for integrating foreign citizens that they promoted from post-war Europe up until the nineties. Said sensation is not entirely unfounded, and some authors have attempted to provide explanations through global analysis, explanations that transcend the boundaries of the school system and all the dynamics that are generated around it. Mahnig (2001), quoted in Santibáñez et al. (2005), offers four elements that partly explain and justify such a negative perception:

- The fragility of economies and the instability of the job market generate a subjective perception of foreigners as citizens that exploit the State's resources that should be destined exclusively to nationals.
- Street disturbances caused by young nationals of immigrant families create the image of these citizens being seen as a genuine threat to social peace.
- Racist attacks by autochthonous nationals against foreigners or citizens of ethnic or cultural minorities also constitute an additional cause for alarm. Its translation into anti-Islam, or the improving election performances of far-right parties are examples of movements in this direction.
- The precarious situations of many foreign or minority citizens are no longer as invisible, and the public projection of their unacceptable living conditions has questioned the very basis of full citizenship.

This data should unquestionably be taken into account when designing policies for equality in Europe. The dream of imagining the construction of social equality on the basis of educational equality is over. Equality in education is necessary but not sufficient in order to progress towards states of greater social cohesion and inclusion, which should lead in turn to measures leading to equal opportunities. A pupil from a foreign family, in order to avoid the risk of social exclusion and to be treated with justice and as a citizen like any other, must find broader means than those offered by schools to break down the barriers preventing his or her full development.

European perspective of the levels of equity in the schooling of foreign and/or minority pupils

We will now be looking more specifically at how the different levels of equality in the schooling of foreign and/or minority pupils is approached from a European perspective. The right to education and the equality of opportunities in doing so should be easy to achieve, but it is not. A comparative analysis of international and national legislation clearly shows that there is a system of tension between both contexts. On the one hand, the international framework (defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as different European Council and European Union Directives in this respect) demands legal equality for all citizens of its member states. In this sense, we could understand that foreign pupils also have the right to be included in said guidelines, but the fact is that an analysis of the policies of certain European countries makes it clear that this is not always the case. On more than one occasion, we find legislation in which almost totally equal treatment is offered to foreigners that have obtained residency, but that equality is not recognised for those foreigners that have not legalised their presence in the country (those people often known as having 'no papers'). If we do not attend to this criteria, and in accordance with the conclusions of a study made by EURYDICE of 'Integrating immigrant children into schools in Europe' (2004), we can distinguish three types of country: those that explicitly recognise the right to education of those children whose parents are not legally resident; those that, through omission, neither deny nor establish relations between residency and admission to schools; and finally, those that do not require schools to admit the children of parents that are not legal residents. In any case, it seems that the universal right to education is contradicted by the restrictions on schooling that we find in some States. This is undoubtedly the first step that needs to be approached.

Changing themes and moving on to the level of equality in relation to equality in accessing schools, the European scenario offers us a panorama that is also defined on the basis of tension between two apparently contradictory phenomena: concentration and dropping out. The phenomenon of concentrating foreign or minority pupils at primary schools is a generalised situation in Europe, and basically responds to three factors: concentration in urban areas, in socially and economically underprivileged areas, and in publicly owned schools (Santibáñez et al., 2005). We should also highlight an unusual concentration in special education centres in some countries. At the same time, it is also common in the European arena for there to be a phenomenon of foreign or minority pupils dropping out of school, especially out of secondary school (op.cit.), although to understand this phenomenon in its context we would need to include an analysis of the

relevance of cultural origin, as there are highly significant differences between some groups and others in this respect. Whatever the case, this reality requires us to propose a hypothesis regarding the relationship between concentration and dropping out, and to observe the extent to which said relation could be causal or simply the dynamic of school exclusion in a broader sense that considers other factors involved. An adequate response to this question would be to clarify what the best measures would be to guarantee equal opportunities in access that avoid any ghettoisation not only at school but also socially.

As for a third level of equality, identified as equality during schooling, we are better off focusing on the type of educational model propagated by the system for the schooling of foreign and/or minority children, as in the vast majority of European countries no significant differences are made between pupils once they are at school. Using data supplied to us by EURYDICE (2004), which positions the different models in relation to a tension defined by the terms 'integration-separation', we observe four modalities of schooling, in accordance with a proposal presented by a work group under the wing of the European Council (2003):

- Specialisation Model. Foreign pupils are schooled in separate units from the other pupils, even in ordinary centres. Said separation, be it temporary or permanent, reduces the opportunity for interaction between peers and, consequently, possibilities for activating learning (especially linguistic learning) and social relationships are lost.
- Incorporation Model. Foreign pupils are schooled in ordinary units without any type of specific support. This type of integration, especially at older ages (over eight years), far from guaranteeing equality can lead to exclusion, as the increasing difficulty of school content, and the lack of linguistic support in the school's language can lead to possible scenarios of failure and dropout.
- Integration Model. Foreign pupils are schooled in ordinary units with specific support in and/or out of the classroom. This method eliminates possible inequalities that may be produced due to a lack of knowledge of the school language or orientation and information about the school.
- Inclusion Model. Foreign pupils are schooled in ordinary units in which all pupils (and not just themselves) receive an educational proposal that recognises their peculiarities as a result of a process of familiar socialisation, and applies methodological strategies that favour the achievement of educational objectives for everybody and between everybody.

Given the results obtained, it seems clear that the specialisation and incorporation models offer fewer opportunities for educational equality than the integration and inclusion models. Those countries that apply the latter two obtain better results at school and for social inclusion, something which needs to be deliberated by those that still consider segregation and/or assimilation to be valid strategies for attaining social cohesion and inclusion.

As for the academic results of this form of schooling, a study has recently appeared that examines the schooling and results of foreign pupils in the environment of the countries of the OECD that presents us with an excellent example of what happens around us in order for this to help establish hypotheses that can enable us to implement a replica in our own context (OECD, 2006). It is a specific explanation of data obtained on the basis of the PISA 2003 study for a sample of fourteen member countries of this association and three associate members. In relation to foreigners, they define three categories: first generation immigrants (pupils born outside of the country whose parents were also born abroad), second generation immigrants (pupils born in the country whose parents were born abroad) and natives (pupils born in the country, and at least one of whose parents were born in the country too). The studies focus on determining, or not, significant differences between the pupils in each category depending on their academic performances in key areas of the curriculum (mathematics, reading, sciences and problem solving), their academic self-concept and their attitudes to the school.

The results of this study produce some highly interesting data for investigation in a not too distant future in our context¹:

- There is no significant relation between the number of immigrant pupils in the countries and existing differences in performance between immigrants and natives. This finding questions the false belief that a high number of foreign pupils impedes educational inclusion, or that their presence in the classroom can reduce the educational level of autochthonous pupils. It seems that a hypothetical inequality in the schooling of autochthonous pupils cannot be explained by the presence of foreign pupils.
- Immigrant pupils have similar levels (and even higher in some cases) of motivation, favourable predispositions to study and a positive attitude to school as their native peers. In none of the countries studied were said levels lower, which reaffirms the notion that foreign pupils are more probably the victims rather than the causes of inequality during schooling, if such a phenomenon should arise.
- However, it is found that immigrant pupils obtain poorer results than their native peers at the end of compulsory education. This finding should worry us insofar as it is also found that the difference in results is not attributable exclusively to the characteristics of the social-economic and cultural environment of immigrant pupils.
- It is also concluded that first generation immigrant pupils obtain poorer results than second generation pupils, something which is made worse if immigrant pupils do not speak the school language as their mother tongue and the host society is European (non-European countries in the OCDE sample (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) do not present significant differences between immigrants and natives).

¹ In the description of these results the terminology used in the original has been translated into English, without that implying that the authors have agreed in any way to the terms used here.

- Finally, we observe how immigrant pupils from countries with strong and long-term linguistic support programmes with clear objectives obtain better academic results than those from countries that do not.

All of this tells us that something happens during compulsory schooling that prevents equal opportunities, something that is not attributable only to the characteristics of foreign pupils but also to schooling conditions and which can therefore be modified in order to achieve better levels of equality. This perspective is opposed to the English case, for example, and which clearly shows that formal conditions of equal opportunity during the schooling of foreign pupils are necessary, but not enough. In order to guarantee equality in obtaining academic results without there being significant differences between immigrant and autochthonous pupils, we need to move into symbolic terrain and progress in two directions: the construction of a less ethnocentric curriculum and an openly anti-racist school system. That is what was proclaimed by world experts attending the Human Movements and Immigration World Congress (Institut Europeu de la Mediterrània, 2006).

Finally, and with respect to the fourth level of equality, that related to qualifications and transition to higher studies or employment, studies made in the European scenario suggest that foreign or minority pupils obtain poorer academic results and at the same time, receive poorer opportunities for integration into the labour market (Santibáñez et al., 2005). However, this statement needs to be considered in terms of a broad set of data that indicates a wide variety of situations, which reveals a rich and complex reality, characterised by such elements as the following:

- There are countries in which pupils belonging to minorities are starting to obtain better results than before thanks to specific programmes.
- In most cases, pupils belonging to minorities that emigrated one or more generations ago obtain better academic results than foreign pupils that have recently arrived.
- In relation to the gender dimension, it is found that in all minority groups female pupils obtained better results than males.
- Regional differences are also detected, the product of decentralised educational systems and a demographic composition of minority groups that is also different.

However, it is also found that inequality at the end of the period of compulsory education significantly responds to symbolic factors, related to the representation that the school produces in terms of foreign or minority pupils, and their own self-concept constructed on the basis of said global representation and the academic itinerary that may have been developed. It is therefore possible that measures for equal opportunities in transition should not exclusively be concentrated outside of the school environment but also within it, on the basis of programmes and actions for educational orientation that can help mitigate these factors.

Final notes

The approach we have made to the different levels of equality has proven necessary but insufficient. As we have suggested on several occasions, complex societies have diversified the scenarios and educational agents in order to provide a better response to emerging needs, something that is contradicted by an analysis of equality policies that consider the school environment in a restricted sense. This text, given the reliability of the official sources handled and the abundance of literature in the respect, cannot be understood as being anything other than an invitation to open a line of research into the issue.

There is a vital need to broaden the range of analysis and proposals to include factors linked to the more community oriented dimension of education (something which, incidentally, is not even contemplated by educational regulations themselves) and to introduce aspects related most of all to two issues: discrimination and racism, and the education that is offered outside of the school institution. Thus, we will be able to offer a more complete panorama of what is really meant by a policy for equal opportunities in education that considers the sons of daughters of foreigners in Spain.