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**HOW FAMILIES' SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES AFFECT**  
**SCHOOLS**

Anna Mata (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Lleida University. Av. Estudi General, 4 25002-Lleida, Email: [annamata@geosoc.udl.cat](mailto:annamata@geosoc.udl.cat)

*Abstract*

This study aims to reflect on the relationship between families' socio-economic, cultural and religious circumstances and their children's success at school. We seek to enquire as to how certain conditions of fragility and inequality of some family groups (due to their origin, religious practice, unstable employment and residential status, and low income) affect families' participation in schools and their children's educational success. We also discuss whether socio-cultural diversity is a relevant factor for equity and equal opportunities in our society. To do so, we will present some of the results achieved via three studies carried out by the GRASE (Social and Educational Analysis) research group at the University of Lleida (Spain) continuously from 2015 until the present. The results show that cultural diversity and the fragile socio-economic circumstances of some families, despite appearing as being attended to in the discourses of schools, in their practices analysed, are difficult to materialize; this, together with the frailties of centres the selves (due to cut-backs in the field of social provisions and education by the public authorities, overloads in the ratios of public centres, disquiet among teaching staff, etc.) in some cases involves situations of inequity and risks of educational exclusion.

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**Keywords:** Families, schools, socio-economic inequalities.



## 1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that when attempting to gain greater insight into the framework in which the inclusion of children in schools and in formal learning processes takes place, it is essential to focus the interest of the researcher not only on those factors which, within the school centre enhance learning (such as the characteristics of the educational centre, the management team and the teachers, etc.), the latter, of course, being of great importance, but also on other equally important but perhaps more complex factors, which we may call extra-school factors, mostly related to the family context of the pupil and the social space in which they are all immersed.

Since the last third of the 20th century, Spain and, in particular, the Catalan Autonomous Community, have received a large number of migrants from other continents. Thus, according to data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, the percentage registered foreign population grew from 0.63% in 1986 to 16.7% in 2016, with a great variety of origins and cultural and religious traditions.

We will focus our analysis on the impact that the arrival and settlement of the foreign population (mostly young people, accompanied by minors or at procreation age) has had on the education system of the Catalan Autonomous Community (Spain), especially dealing with the qualitative aspects. This autonomous community is one of those that have received a higher proportion of foreigners during the established period, as can be seen in Table 01, which shows the impact that the foreign population had on schooling figures for six to 12-year old children (primary school).

**Table 01.** Percentage of foreign students over the total number of students enrolled in the Primary School of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, by years. Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Department of Education of the Government of Catalonia.

Year	Percentage of foreign students over the total number of students enrolled
2006	10,2%
2007	11,4%
2010	13,0%
2013	13,2%
2016	12,9%

We refer particularly to this population, given that we focus on the existing correlations between educational success and socio-cultural and economic inequalities; and the immigrant population which, on the one hand, has been most hit by the recent economic crisis in Spain and, on the other, combines all “the euphemisms of diversity” at school, as coined by Tarabini (2017, p. 67), (Table 2).

**Table 02.** Euphemisms of diversity. Source: Tarabini (2017, p. 67)

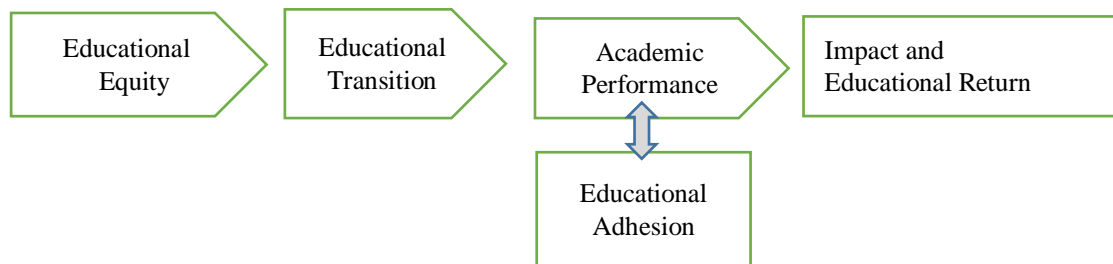
Student diversity	Foreign students of low socio-economic status or of gypsy ethnicity. Students with learning problems.
Group diversity	Groups within the centre schooling pupils with a low academic level or behavioural problems.
Centre diversity	Centres with concentrations of students at a disadvantage due to segregated schooling.

Subsequently, we will provide reflections on the conditions of schooling, policies to meet diversity; educational success and segregated schooling occurring within schools. For the design of social policies that pursue social cohesion, these reflections may be useful.

## 2. Problem Statement

In 2013, the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalan Government), in view of the alarming figures of academic failure, which is at around 30% in this autonomous community, developed a “Plan for the reduction of academic failure in Catalonia 2012-2018”. It defines “educational success” under almost solely quantitative parameters. Thus, the following indicators are identified: suitability rates, repetition rates, graduation rates, and the results of the various assessment tests that the “Consejo Superior de Evaluación del Sistema Educativo”<sup>1</sup> wishes to implement (basic skills assessment tests, etc.). From our point of view, the understanding and delimitation of the concept goes far beyond quantitative indicators and we approach the concept from a more holistic definition, including socio-cultural and family variables as well as variables of the school itself.

So, we find timely the conceptual approach to educational success proposed by the Bofill Foundation in its Yearbook (Albaigés and Ferrer-Estebán, 2016) which construes education from a broad perspective, not restricted only to the scope of the formal education system, but also to other systems that educate beyond school (family, leisure, culture, etc.). As a result, it analyses the phenomenon of educational success in its various dimensions, based on indicators related to academic performance, of course, but also related to equity (segregated schooling, for example), educational adhesion (continuity at the centre, for example), educational transition (between educational centres-levels, for example) and educational impact (the child’s socio-economic and cultural development, for example).



**Figure 01.** Relationship between manifestations of educational success (García Alegre, 2014, p. 6)

According to this criterion, the socio-cultural and economic circumstances of families will influence the qualities in which the schooling of the children in their charge takes place and their educational success. This relationship is synthesized by Garcia Alegre (2014) in Figure 01.

If we ask ourselves what the most disadvantaged groups in Catalonia are today, we will conclude that several studies have been conducted on vulnerable groups in Catalonia since the economic crisis of 2007 and all of them agree as to how it has mushroomed, especially among families of foreign origin.

<sup>1</sup> Advisory Body to the Ministry of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya.

Let us cite, without limitation: the “Report on the Integration of Immigrants in Catalunya” in 2015, in a cross-sectional analysis from 2008 to 2015, points out that the rate of unemployment among the foreign population in Catalonia trebles that of Spaniards. And studies by the European Anti-Poverty Network (AEPN)<sup>2</sup> on poverty in Spain have highlighted in recent years the major divergences between the AROPE (At-Risk-Of Poverty and Exclusion) rate for the Spanish population and the foreign population for all years (2008-2016), with differences ranging between 29 and 38 percentage points higher. The study is quite categorical in asserting that nearly two out of every three foreign nationals from outside the EU (60.1%) were in a situation of poverty or social exclusion in 2016 (the last year for which figures are available).

And, to get an idea of their quantitative composition, according to data from IDESCAT<sup>3</sup>, in 2017 Catalonia was host to 13.8% of the resident foreign population; but to understand the impact of immigration in this autonomous community we also note that around 20,000 Spanish nationality documents are granted each year to people of foreign origin.

Regarding another issue, studies on inequalities in education centres are not new to social studies. Since the emergence of the so-called Coleman Report, there has been a huge amount of sociological literature dedicated to the analysis of inequalities in educational outcomes and the weight of the social factors associated with these inequalities (Carabaña, 2016). One of the most controversial findings of this report was that strictly school-related factors (curricular organization or teaching model) had very little impact on the inequality of educational outcomes [see the review of Carabaña (2016)].

Based on the empirical observation of an existing relationship between results at school and students’ social origin, numerous investigations have been carried out to ascertain the factors that explain this situation. The majority of such investigations come within the so-called “social reproduction” movements that attribute to the economic, cultural, symbolic, or linguistic capital of families the causal effect to explain why the children of the most disadvantaged classes enjoy less success in academic achievement (Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2017; Gratacós and Ugidos, 2011). In recent years, this perspective has been reinforced by the relation between ability and the socio-economic status of families measured by the OECD (2013). In any case, and unequivocally, it is among “diverse” students or “students of minority cultural origin”, as Gratacós and Ugidos (2011) define them, that the mentioned correlations -educational success-socio-cultural and economic inequalities-, appear to establish a perverse cycle.

From this perspective, the distance between school achievement and social origin would be mediated, when not reinforced, by selective institutional practices (organizational and pedagogical), whether with regard to access (choice of school, distinction between public school and private school, etc.) or to the process (segregated schooling, level of performance, school environment, etc.). A great many studies already show that it is the structure and logic of the educational system that maintain and create new inequalities among its students (Bolívar, 2005) with practices of segregated schooling according to degrees of knowledge that are highly related to social origin (Pamies and Castejón, 2015). Torrents, Merino, García, & Valls (2018) demonstrate that among the factors influencing unequal educational outcomes, the inequality of results can be explained rather by segregated schooling than the organizational model of the centres. Pupils coming from working families are more disadvantaged if schooled at centres where the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eapn.es/estadodepobreza/>

<sup>3</sup> Statistical Institute of Catalonia <https://www.idescat.cat>

working class is in the majority, whereas the curricular organization of the centre has a very minor impact on the results. And Tarabini (2017) concludes in her study that, in schools, the internal mechanisms of curricular diversification and the teachers' own expectations (negative or positive towards the pupil's possibilities) are two very powerful factors in the dynamics of failure, abandonment or success in the education system by pupils from families with greater socio-cultural diversity.

And finally, among the factors that we have identified as "extra-centre" we would echo some "Local Education Policies", known as "Planes de Entorno" (environment plans) that were promoted in Catalonia under the LEC (Catalan Education Act) which sought to find synergies between the regional administration and the municipal bodies to combat territorial educational inequalities and seek territorial equity in terms of education and social integration issues in general. The scope of and budget for these policies have shrunk since their inception in 2005 almost to the point of disappearance today. Thus, between the 2005-2006 and 2011-12 academic years, the economic endowments of these Plans were co-funded by the Catalan Government and the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Immigration, within the framework of the support fund for the reception and integration of immigrants. The funding for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years came exclusively from the budget of the Generalitat de Catalunya, and since 2016, those municipalities interested were invited to fund their continuity practically entirely, which, in the opinion of the Pi i Sunyer Foundation (2016) induces many territorial inequities and disparities.

### **3. Research Questions**

This text reflects the results referring to three of the goals of our research:

-To find out how the policy to meet diversity in public and private centres of education has been developed and establish the plurality of its practical development.

-To analyse the discourses and intercultural practices in education and how they affect the equality of opportunities and the equity of pupils in schools.

-To detect the actions carried out by the various public authorities to promote equal opportunities and equity in schools.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

We aim to provide some insights into what is currently being done by the education system to accommodate the increasing social and cultural diversity and what are the difficulties and challenges for tackling equity of access and permanence therein.

### **5. Research Methods**

Some of the results of three investigations carried out by the GRASE research group at the University of Lleida from 2015 until today are shown:

-Research on "Cultural and religious diversity in primary schools in Catalonia". Research conducted in the period 2015-2016. Quantitative and qualitative techniques were combined in its performance. Specifically, a first, quantitative phase was developed in which 380 surveys were carried out at public

schools. Then, the qualitative phase was implemented, with 21 in-depth interviews with persons in charge of schools, whose experiences were considered especially unique and innovative.

-Research on “Cultural and religious diversity in secondary schools in Catalonia” . Research conducted in the period 2016-17. A mixed methodology was also used for its performance. In a first phase, a survey of 165 secondary schools was carried out and in a second phase, 26 in-depth interviews were held on persons in charge of schools whose experiences were identified as being particularly interesting.

-Research on cultural diversity and equal opportunities in schools in Catalonia. Research conducted from 2016 to the present. In the framework of this research, in 2017 surveys were conducted on 545 representatives of school management teams and seven in-depth interviews were held with representatives of the Education Authorities of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia. Also, a large amount of documentation was collected on the different Planes de Acogida (reception plans) at local administration level in Catalonia’s 42 capitals of the comarcas (“counties”).

## 6. Findings

Having listened to the entire education community: school head teachers, teachers, members of parents’ associations, representatives of regional and local authorities, it can be stated that:

**A-**Families today present a broad variety of cultural and relational patterns. Generally speaking, this diversity does not pose problems within the school. However, both management teams and teachers express that they do not have a sufficiently clear and robust idea as to what specific actions should be carried out to accommodate them, specifically.

**B-**In fact, in schools, when the teachers are asked about the socio-cultural diversity of the students and their families, they almost immediately shift the issue to the socio-economic diversity of the latter. That is, what really is viewed with concern at schools is not socio-cultural, but socio-economic diversity; the financial precariousness of many families of foreign origin triggers processes of educational exclusion and inequity among students.

**C-**The head teachers of schools were asked if, in their opinion, inequalities had grown among students at their centres over the past 10 years. The most common responses indicate that 16.9% consider that they have risen “greatly” and 49.2% “quite a lot” (i.e., two out of every three respondents stated quite a lot or greatly); we also find responses that point towards “little” (23.3%) or “not at all” (7.3%). It is noteworthy that this perception is related to the socio-cultural and socio-economic profiles of the families of the pupils at the centres. It is observed that as families’ socio-economic and socio-cultural levels decrease, the response that inequalities have grown increases. Thus, for example, 44.4% of respondents at centres with a high socio-economic level, 61.9% with an average level and 81.6% with a low socio-economic level respond that they have grown “greatly” or “quite a lot”, The same happens for socio-cultural levels, the responses being that 44.7% of respondents at centres with a high socio-economic level, 61.9% with an average level and 81.6% with a low socio-economic level state that they have grown “greatly” or “quite a lot”.

**D-**Likewise, when asked about the existence of equal opportunities in the education system, the responses are polarized, since 46.1% believe they exist and 43.5% are of the opinion that they do not. Although the responses are not homogeneous, the lower the socio-economic status of the families of the

students at the centre, the greater the perception that equality does not exist: 38.9% of the those surveyed at centres with high-level families, 40.6% with average- and 53.7% with low-level families indicate that equality does not exist.

**E-**For greater precision, a question was posed in which the respondents were asked which factors come into play so that students in Catalonia do not have the same opportunities (Table 3).

**Table 03.** Factors influencing unequal opportunities among students. Source: Author's own

Factors	Proportion
Factors related to the system of education	53.0%
Factors related to the individual school	45.7%
Contextual family factors	56.5%
Specific family factors	83.5%
Student-related factors	44.0%

We thus note that the factors attributable to the families, their socio-personal or contextual situation are the ones that are most argued by those in charge of the centre. Second, there would be factors attributable to the school, in particular, or the education system (including: financial constraints, high ratios and limited staffing, among others). Attributable to teachers, the following are mentioned: their attitude (7.7%), unsuitable work dynamics (7.3%), their training (5.9%), coordination with other professionals (1.7%), and the teaching methodology they use (5.9%). And thirdly, factors attributable to the pupils. Somehow, the prevailing view is that that the cause of unequal opportunities is rather individual than collective; more private than public; with little self-criticism of teaching methodologies and attitudes.

**F-**The impact of the economic crisis of 2007 has caused a reduction in the resources they receive and of net investment in general. In turn, this has led to increased pressure in the classroom for teachers (due to increasing ratios and the lack of supply teachers to cover for teachers on sick leave, etc.). Head teachers note that in the past 10 years economic resources targeting the most disadvantaged students and, therefore, those whose needs require covering, have been reduced; thus, 72.3% of respondents (more specifically, 64.7 per cent of interviewees from private schools and 74.8% from public schools) deem so. When asked about the human resources of the school, the correlation is the same: 72.3% state that they have been reduced (52.2% in the private and 78.6% in the public sector), 19.1% that they have been maintained, and 6.6% that they have improved. A study by the trade union Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (2016) reveals that in the period 2009 to 2014 in Spain, the budget for education fell by 14.9% (Table 4).

**Table 04.** Evolution of spending on Education in Spain. Period 2009 to 2014. Source Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (2016, p.22)

Chapter	2009	2014	VARIATION %
Remuneration of employees	32.330	28.625	-11,5%
Consumptions intermediates	4.677	3.428	-26,7%
Production acquire in the market	7.090	7.007	-1,2%
Gross capital formation	3.571	1.336	-62,6%
Remaining cost entries	2.024	1.902	-6,0%
Total spending on education	49.692	42.298	-14,9%

As can be seen, this reduction took place in all items, although here we highlight that of “employee remuneration” (-11.5%). This indicates that, at a time of greatest deprivation and stress for many families, the human resources that were allocated to the education system were cut back and also specific projects or programmes involving specific attention to diversity, as shown in the attached Table (Table 05) never exceeded 1.5% of the total budget for education (of the Catalan autonomy, in this case) and did not evolve in accordance with the percentage of foreign students.

**Table 05.** Contribution by the Ministry of the Catalan Government to interculturality projects, in relation to the proportion of foreign pupils in primary schools. 2006 - 2016. Source: Torres, Farré, & Sala (2018, p.7)

Year	Contribution to interculturality projects Catalan Ministry of Education (%)	Percentage of foreign pupils over total pupils in Catalonia (%)
2006	0.9	10.2
2007	1.1	11.4
2010	1.2	13.0
2013	0.8	13.2
2016	1.0	12.9

**G-**The “Local Education Policies” that seek to promote success at school and educational equity have undergone a process of disintegration, devaluation, reduction and have somewhat drifted from their purposes. The autonomic authorities have to a great extent reduced the financial contributions made to local authorities so that the latter, in turn, implemented “Environment Plans” or “District Plans” pursuing equity and the prevention of the exclusion of the resident population, in various aspects, including education. This decrease has resulted in the fragmentation of the model; i.e., it is the various local administrations that have made decisions on the abolition or maintenance (total or partial) of these schemes, because they are the ones that almost exclusively fund them. Thus, we find Councils that have kept their budgets and plans; others that have reduced or modified them; and others that have directly abolished them. Equity in education throughout the Catalan Autonomous Community has shattered into a multitude of equities or inequities.

## 7. Conclusion

**7.1.** Improved educational success must guarantee educational equity, promoting equal opportunities for access to and benefit from educational resources. Equity allows compensating for inequalities of pupils’ origin and promoting educational adhesion in a process that feeds back on itself, preventing social origin from conditioning the educational trajectory of individuals and promoting social cohesion. An education system that is ill-provided with means and human resources can hardly cope with the social and cultural disparities present today in the classrooms and will not manage to reverse inequities of origin.

**7.2.** In Catalonia, there is a risk of a triple exclusion of pupils of the “diversity groups”: the first exclusion occurs with streaming within a school according to pupils’ academic results or initial socio-linguistic skills. The second exclusion occurs when diversity students are grouped together to a very high degree at certain schools, which end up becoming “ghetto schools”, with high rates of pupils of foreign origin, hindering their absorption into society. The third exclusion is territorial, since the end of state and



regional diversity schemes has led this weight to fall almost exclusively with local authorities, creating a situation of great disparity (municipalities coexist that allocate human and economic means to achieve social equities, with others that have chosen to cancel such schemes and take no specific action).

**7.3** Our intention is to continue deepening on this subject of research. To this end, we will expand our view to the whole of the Autonomous Communities of Spain and we have proposed the creation of a socio-educational observatory for the political leaders of our Autonomous Community.

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