

Economic crisis and equal opportunities: the response of management teams in Catalonia (Spain) to educational inequalities

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Abstract. The economic crisis has had an impact at many levels, including on education. In Spain, there has been little in-depth research into its effect on the education system and the profile of those most affected. Given the difficulty of accessing reliable information on these issues, our study consists of a survey of representatives of management teams from preschool and primary education centers (3-12 years) in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia. This respondent profile made it possible to obtain indirect information about what is experienced, in differing degrees, in schools. The results suggest that the crisis has significantly affected families and schools; especially the most vulnerable families, who are more often enrolled in public schools. The factors that most influence there being inequalities are attributed to families, while less responsibility is assigned to schools and the education system. All this occurs in a context in which a significant reduction in economic and human resources is recognized in part of the system.

Keywords: education system; equity; family-school relationship; students; vulnerable families.

CRISIS ECONÓMICA E IGUALDAD DE OPORTUNIDADES: RESPUESTA DE LOS EQUIPOS DIRECTIVOS DE CATALUÑA (ESPAÑA) A LAS DESIGUALDADES EDUCATIVAS.

Resumen. La crisis económica ha tenido un impacto en muchos niveles, incluido el educativo. En España, apenas se ha investigado en profundidad su efecto en el sistema educativo y el perfil de los más afectados. Dada la dificultad de acceder a información fiable sobre estas cuestiones, nuestro estudio consiste en una encuesta a representantes de equipos directivos de centros de educación primaria (6-12 años) de la Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña. Este perfil de encuestados ha permitido obtener un conocimiento indirecto de lo que se vive en los centros educativos, aunque más en unos que en otros. Los resultados sugieren que la crisis ha afectado significativamente a las familias y a los centros educativos, pero especialmente a las familias más vulnerables, que en la mayoría de los casos están matriculadas en centros públicos. Los factores que más influyen en la existencia de desigualdades se atribuyen a las familias, mientras que se asigna una menor responsabilidad a las escuelas y al sistema educativo. Todo ello se produce en un contexto en el que se reconoce una importante reducción de recursos económicos y humanos en parte del sistema.

Palabras clave: sistema educativo; equidad; relación familia-escuela; alumnos; familias vulnerables.

1. Introduction¹

It is clear that an economic crisis has repercussions on the education system of the affected countries, but it is less clear who is most impacted by the crisis. A priori, we understand that the crisis leads to a reduction in resources dedicated to education, and also that families will have more difficulty in coping with the expenses of schooling children. Spain has experienced, and is only timidly emerging from, a severe economic crisis that has led to a reduction in public resources dedicated to social, health and education services (Martínez García, 2019; Murillo & Martínez Garrido, 2018b; Bonal, 2016). In our research, we are interested in the last of these. There has been little study into who is most affected by this reduction in resources (human and material) for education, possibly because it is a recent phenomenon or because it has not aroused sufficient interest among researchers, or even owing to the similar reductions in resources for research. Therefore, we studied schools in Catalonia (one of the Spanish Autonomous Communities with competences in educational matters), which has undergone a large economic crisis and is one of the territories in which there has been a larger reduction in public budgets. The research aimed to detect indirectly, from the directors of schools providing compulsory education for children aged 6 to 12, and also preschools for children aged 3 to 6, whether resources have actually been reduced and whether any specific group or type of centers have been the most affected. At the same time, the work defines the main factors that lead to inequality of opportunities among students, determining whether they stem from the environment or family characteristics, or from the education system, schools and their professionals.

The research presented in his article, starts from the fact that in the 1970s, schooling in Spain, and therefore in Catalonia, began a slow process of compensating for existing social inequalities, developing policies with the objective of creating more equality of opportunity (Garreta, 2003; Pascual, 2006) and characterized by the search for equity. It is also true, however, that their design and application has not always yielded the expected results, and less so in situations of economic crisis that clearly condition the material and human resources dedicated to the education system and equalizing actions. Therefore, educational inclusion is a relevant issue when equal opportunities are addressed.

The objectives of the research are to detect, from representatives of management teams of preschools and primary schools (3-12 years), whether inequalities have increased during the recent economic crisis, and who has been

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affected the most; as well as to examine in depth the responses that schools make to inequality and the degree of success of these measures. The economic crisis of 2008 brought about a global change. Its main consequences in the following years include an increase in unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, worsening of work conditions, and a reduction in public budgets. Education was one of the areas most affected, as there has been a large decrease in its allocations, especially in aspects linked to inclusive policies and the reduction of inequalities. During the period covered by the study, Catalonia had 711,703 pupils in the second cycle of preschools and primary schools (3-12 years) in the 2016/17 school year. Now, in the 2020/21 academic year, the figure has been reduced to 681,808 students, a decrease of 4.20% (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021).

The initial hypothesis of our research was that the economic crisis has had a significant impact on the Catalan education system and that, clearly, this has been much greater in some schools than in others due to the family profiles of the enrolled students. Moreover, the most vulnerable groups are likely to be most affected, while others have withstood the impacts better.

1.1 Inequality and equity in education

One of the first steps to situate ourselves in equal opportunities is to clarify what we mean by inequality. This is the other side of the coin of our subject and is also what truly concerns us, together with the capacity of society to create, in what seems to be the beginning of the recovery from the current economic crisis, socio-educational policies and actions to achieve equal educational opportunities for everyone. In the study of social, cultural, economic and educational inequalities, we detected deficits in social efficiency. This is essential for sustaining the growth that allows us to maintain levels of social welfare that society requires, and to consolidate the capacity to respond to inequalities that affect society in general and in particular those living below or close to the poverty line. For Martínez García (2017, p.17), «inequality refers to unequal access to material and symbolic resources of a society that are linked to the recognition of a person as a full member of that society». If we look at the educational context, we observe that inequality significantly affects the improvement of educational results obtained by students (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012; 2013) and manifests itself in different ways and at different moments of the formative process, as we will explain later. Given this inequality, policies and actions must be generated for students who, due to gender and/or ethnic or family origin, do not have the opportunity to be included in the knowledge society (a society in which lifelong learning is increasingly revealed

as one of the most important elements to avoid being trapped by inequalities) with equal opportunities and equity being the central principles that should inform education systems (Ferrer & Gortazar, 2021; Eurydice, 2020; Tarabini & Ingram, 2020; European Commission, 2019; Rappoport *et alii*, 2019; Salido & Martínez García, 2018; OECD, 2018b; OECD, 2017; Tiana, 2015).

Many factors act on educational processes in general, although not all causes of inequality are generated in school. One of the issues that generates and affects inequality, and that currently concerns Catalonia, is school segregation and, consequently, the higher concentration in certain public schools (which often have fewer resources than private schools) of students from families with limited economic, social and cultural resources (Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2018a; Murillo *et alii*, 2018; Alegre, 2017; Albaigés & Ferrer-Esteban, 2017). The economic crisis has significantly affected children from families in precarious situations. The increase in child poverty stemming from the economic crisis has been accompanied by an increase in the intensity of the risk of poverty (Oxfam Intermón, 2019; Tarragona Fenosa, 2018; Albaigés & Pedró, 2017; García-Gómez & Cabanillas López, 2017; González-Bueno, 2014; UNICEF Research Center, 2014; González-Bueno *et alii*, 2012). This process is affecting equal opportunities and the reproduction of inequalities, already present in the education system, and has worsened since the 2008 crisis (Fernández & Andrés, 2019; Martínez García & Molina, 2019; Choi, 2018; Julià Cano *et alii*, 2015; Calero & Choi, 2012; Musset, 2012). The following data show how the most vulnerable individuals are being affected by underfunding: between 2008 and 2014 the investment allocated by the Department of Education of the Generalitat of Catalonia [Catalan Government] to the creation of places for early childhood education in public schools fell from 37,480,000 euros to 4,759,000 (Ombudsman of Catalonia, 2015). These figures are important because they show how, from the beginning of schooling, the conditions to overcome inequalities, rather than being resolved, have worsened in recent years. In light of this situation, it is necessary to take into account that early educational attention is one of the main resources for stopping the reproduction of poverty and social inequalities (Tedesco, 2004; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Tarabini *et alii*, 2015; Tarabini, 2018; Fernández Enguita, 2018; Gentile & Marí-Klose, 2019; Gortazar, 2019; Lozano Pérez & Trinidad Requena, 2019; Fundación Europea Sociedad y Educación, 2021).

On the other hand, Martínez García (2017) expresses that education must tend to equity, that is, it must support and provide more options and opportunities to students, families and schools faced with greater obstacles in the schooling

process due to situations of inequality. To correctly analyze the situation of equity, «it is necessary to take into account the different criteria we will use to measure it» (Bonal, 2015, p.16). As indicated by the aforementioned author, the criteria of distributive justice used to study equity should guide the development and application of the educational policy priorities aimed at the most vulnerable sectors. When policies distance themselves from studies conducted to guide their objectives, preferring instead to serve other interests, the results of the policies do not respond to the needs of the population, and therefore widen the social and educational gap. Sánchez & Manzanares (2014), in a review of international trends in educational equity, show that countries with high levels of equity and focused on promoting the social cohesion of students tend to obtain better academic results.

Calero (2010) states that one of the most notorious effects of the lack of equity is course repetition, a situation that has become more acute during the crisis. Martínez García (2017) also shows that the crisis has generated an increase in the net enrollment rate in post-compulsory education, as young people who have difficulty entering the labor market have decided to return to the education system to continue their training and thus better their chances of finding work. In this context of greater enrollment, the cuts in education implemented since the beginning of the crisis have accentuated equity deficits. An example that demonstrates the scope of these cuts is that in Catalonia public spending for educational policies has been reduced by 20% during the crisis (Farré & Torres, 2017).

1.2 Equal opportunities and inclusion

next, we address an issue of great complexity, that of equal opportunities in compulsory education. The complexity is evident, given the diversity of factors involved and the social and educational changes being experienced. This complexity is accentuated if we take into account the effects of the economic crisis that are still impacting a large percentage of the population. This in turn affects social and educational inclusion. Undoubtedly, in the Mediterranean countries and in particular in Catalonia (Spain), the weakness of the welfare state influences the discourse and specific policies currently in place, as well as those yet to be implemented to respond to the vulnerability of such basic rights as education. It is in this context, and from what we have outlined, that we address equal opportunities.

Various authors have studied equality and inequality of opportunities; among other scholars we can highlight Coleman (1966; 1968); Bourdieu (1973); Boudon (1983); Bruner (2003); Bolivar (2005; 2012) and in particular Martínez

Celorrio (2016; 2017), who studied the educational impact of the recent crisis in Catalonia. These authors focus their interest on cultural capital, social origin, family environment, costs and benefits of schooling, school action, social justice and the impact of austerity policies, among other aspects. Throughout the crisis, all these factors, though some more than others, have had an impact on equal opportunities. From an economic perspective, not all families can cover the costs and access the benefits of schooling in the same way due to the effects of the crisis on decisions regarding schooling and its continuity. The OECD, in the Education at a Glance report (2018a), states that low socio-economic status, together with a low socio-economic level, negatively affects the chances of participating in non-compulsory early childhood education as well as the completion of higher secondary education.

In a context in which equal opportunities must be one of the priorities of educational policies, we need to deepen the concept of inclusion. Complementing the above, we understand inclusion not only as a set of actions aimed at the full inclusion of people, but also define it as a way of understanding education that reconstructs the idea of schooling, based on a transformative approach aimed at restructuring schools towards an effective education (Santos Rego, 2009). By effective we mean those schools that work from educational leadership to organize comprehensive learning of knowledge and values for all their students (McBeath, 2007). One of the more interesting studies for working in this direction is the report prepared by Field, Kuczera, & Pont (2007) entitled *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*. Of the ten steps that the authors recommend, we chose to highlight two of them that include an inclusive orientation, which positively affects equal opportunities and involves both schools and family contexts. The first is to identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school and thus reduce year repetition. One of the main concerns is to focus attention on deficits in the success of all students, but in particular of minorities, promoting solidarity classrooms that allow students to reflect on their situation and fundamental personal values (Dee, 2015). The second is to strengthen the links between the school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

These two points are not proposed from excessive optimism in the ability of the school and families to promote equal opportunities; we are aware of the difficulties. Rather, they are based on a concept of inclusion that focuses on the participation of all students and families in the educational process, and also on listening to the students' voices. All this without forgetting that to promote equal opportunities based on inclusion we must further investigate the transformative

and collaborative approach, to improve ways of understanding inclusion and its practice (Messiou, 2012; 2017).

In inclusion, we must also highlight the leadership role of management teams in schools, especially in contexts of crisis and vulnerability. A number of these authors insist on certain fundamental aspects of educational leadership, such as Walters *et alii* (2003), who focus on determining elements of educational leadership including a culture based on the sense of community and cooperation, visibility, communication, being an agent of change, flexibility, etc. For their part, Leithwood *et alii* (2008) stress that educational leadership must be sensitive to the context in which it is exercised and that this leadership must be shared.

Likewise, it is important to collect certain studies and lines of research on the role of management teams in times and moments of crisis, as well as in situations of vulnerability, poverty and educational inequalities (González Rodríguez *et al*, 2019; Egidio Gálvez & Bertran Tarrés, 2017; Carrasco *et alii*, 2015; González González, 2015; Horn & Marfán, 2010; Ríos *et alii*, 2010). In this regard, concepts such as resilient leadership, which focuses on the adaptive capacity of management teams in adverse circumstances, become important (Day & Qing, 2015; Trujillo *et alii*, 2011). Thus, «Schools can enhance resilience through programs which build positive social norms and generate a sense of connectedness to teachers, peers, and the academic goals of the school» (Cahill *et alii*, 2014, p.5).

2. Design and methodology

Our research, then, is framed in the context described above. It analyzes, among other issues, factors that have an influence on equal opportunities, while seeking to detect and address existing weaknesses at a time of (nascent) recovery from the economic crisis, which we believe has had considerable impact on the education system. In addition, the given methodological approach allows us to ascertain, in the absence of other reliable sources of information, whether school directors believe that the crisis has affected equal opportunities. To carry out this approach, a survey was used to detect and understand the aforementioned issues.

2.1 Participants

The study population consists of the centers that provide early childhood (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) education in Catalonia. Catalonia is one of the Spanish Autonomous Communities with competences in educational matters (for further information see: <http://ensenyament.gencat.cat/ca/inici>) that has

developed discourses, policies, plans and projects to address inequalities known to exist in the education system.

The sample was calculated based on data from the Generalitat of Catalonia on the number of centers in the 2013-2014 academic year, both public and private. With a confidence level of 95.5%, in the most unfavorable case ($p = q = 50\%$), and a statistical error of $\pm 3.5\%$, the sample (n) consisted of 545 centers.

It should be considered that, during the period covered by the study, Catalonia had 711,703 pupils in the second cycle of preschools and primary schools (3-12 years) in the 2016/17 school year. Now, in the 2020/21 academic year, the figure has been reduced to 681,808 students, a decrease of 4.20% (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021).

The schools in which the survey was conducted were drawn from the list of centers in Catalonia using a table of random numbers, and were therefore randomly selected. After verifying that the sample would be representative of the territorial distribution of the population (N), we decided on the calls that were to be made. The sample, corresponding to the profile of the population, consists of 75.6% publicly owned centers and 24.4% privately owned ones (of which 22.8% are charter schools, that is, they receive public funding, while the rest do not).

2.2 Instrument

The instrument used to collect the information, that is, the questionnaire, was designed by the project research team in an earlier theoretical-empirical phase. We analyzed the discourses and policies of the Catalan educational administration from the theoretical point of view, as well as expanding on research carried out on the subject at the international and Spanish levels. This, plus a phase of documentary interviews (a total of six) with representatives of the education administration, enabled us to design an instrument consisting of different types of questions: open, closed, single or multiple answer. Before it was applied, the instrument was validated by three university specialists from the areas of psychopedagogy and sociology, evaluating and reviewing the questions and their appropriateness for answering the research objectives. At the same time the questionnaire was tested and its correct understanding, structure and the order of the questions were verified.

2.3 Procedure

As we wanted an overview of the center as well as a realistic vision, and given the impossibility of obtaining certain data on the evolution and situation of

students, it was decided that the best profile for the research participants would be individuals with extensive knowledge about the operation of schools. Hence, we chose members of the management teams with years of experience in the same center. The empirical work was conducted through telephone surveys (from January 9 to September 15, 2017) as this reduced costs considerably. A maximum of three telephone calls were made per center, with a further call if there was no response. The population was accessible and a response was easily obtained in this way, since there are listings in the education administration. The specific profile of the interviewees was: 69.2% are directors, 25.7% are heads of studies, and 5.1% have other responsibilities within the team. Once the empirical work was completed, the questionnaires obtained were coded and tabulated and a statistical analysis was performed using software by Pulse Train, with which univariate and bivariate analyses were performed and statistical significance tests were applied (t-test of proportions to 95%).

3. Results. Inequalities in the school system in Catalonia in times of crisis

The survey, as we will present below, focused on the evolution of inequalities in Catalonia during the ten-year period from 2007 to 2017 (2008 is widely considered the year the economic crisis began in Spain), and the profile of students who are considered most affected by this situation. In addition, we analyzed the factors that are currently considered influential in promoting equal opportunities and the actions schools are taking to reduce inequalities.

3.1 Evolution of inequalities

One of the questions we asked respondents focused on determining whether inequalities had increased among students in their center over the last 10 years. Among the possible answers, the most frequent indicate that 16.9% of the participants consider that inequalities have increased “quite a bit” and 49.2% “somewhat”. There are also answers that point to “slightly” (23.3%) or “not at all” (7.3%)². These responses vary depending on the ownership of the respondent’s center: the perception that inequalities have increased is greater among interviewees in public centers than among private ones, as presented below.

² A total 3.3% did not answer the question.

Table 1. Have inequalities among students increased in the last 10 years?

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Ownership of center</i>	
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
A lot	16.9	18.4	12.0
Quite a bit	49.2	49.8	47.4
Slightly	23.3	20.9	30.8
Not at all	7.3	7.8	6.0
Don't know/No answer [DK/NA]	3.3	3.2	3.8

Source: Own elaboration.

It is also noteworthy that this perception is related to the socio-cultural and socio-economic profile of families from each center, which has a connection to the ownership of schools: public centers have a greater representation of families with socio-economic and socio-cultural levels that we have labeled as low. To determine these socio-economic and socio-cultural profiles, since it is not possible to obtain more real data for reasons of confidentiality, respondents were asked about the percentage of families in their center who have high, medium and low socio-cultural levels and the percentage of families with a high, medium and low socio-economic status. This enabled us to construct three socio-economic and socio-cultural³ levels, which had significantly different responses. We can observe that as the socio-economic and socio-cultural levels decrease, the response that inequalities have grown increases. For example, 44.4% of respondents from centers with families of a high socio-economic status respond that inequalities have grown “a lot” or “quite a bit”, while this is affirmed by 61.9% of respondents with a medium level and 81.6% with a low level. The same occurs with socio-cultural levels, with 44.7% of the high level giving the aforementioned answers, 62.5% of the medium and 83.3% of the low.

To deepen our analysis, we asked about the profile of students whose educational opportunities had worsened. The various answers are distributed as follows: 50.6% indicate that they are children of families at risk of social exclusion for socio-economic reasons, 13.9% specify that they are children of Roma families, 4.6% foreigners and 12.1% that they are students with specific educational needs that are no longer being served in the same way, 4.2% dysfunctional families,

³ Responses, despite what one might think a priori, were easy and clear, and schools were defined as having one profile or another given that, in general, the % of one of the profiles was clearly dominant (only 47 and 52 centers, respectively, did not want to respond regarding the socio-economic and socio-cultural level of families). In summary, 7.22% of the centers have families with a predominantly high socio-economic status, 63.25% medium and the remainder (29.53%) low. Regarding the socio-cultural level, the percentages are 9.5% high, 61.25% medium and 29.25% low.

3.7% families with a low cultural level, 3.5% students with emotional needs, 2.6% families with inadequate educational models from the school point of view, and other minor responses.

Table 2. Profile of students whose educational opportunities have worsened

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Center</i>	
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
All students could be better served	0.9	1.2	-
Students from families at risk of social exclusion	50.6	52.9	43.6
Students from families of foreign origin	4.6	5.3	2.3
Students from Roma families	13.9	12.6	18.0
Students with specific educational needs	12.1	11.9	12.8
High capacity students	0.9	1.0	0.8
Students with emotional needs	3.5	3.4	3.8
Students with aggressive behavior	0.6	0.7	-
Students from families with low cultural level	3.7	3.2	5.3
Students from dysfunctional families	4.2	3.4	6.8
Students from families with inadequate educational models	2.6	3.2	0.8
Others	2.0	1.9	2.3
DK/NA	20.7	21.4	18.8

Source: Own elaboration.

Another question with a closed answer allowed us to verify that 72.3% of the respondents consider that in the last 10 years the economic resources directed towards the most disadvantaged students (and, therefore, with needs to be met) have been reduced. Only 6.6% say that they have increased, while 17.2% that they have remained unchanged. These last percentages come mainly from respondents from privately owned centers (among which 64.7% also indicate that the situation has worsened, which increases to 74.8% among public school respondents), in line with public center responses indicating that resources have diminished. In addition, the same answer also appears when asking about human resources: 72.3% indicate that they have been reduced, 19.1% say they have been maintained and 6.6% say that they have improved. Once again, these last two

responses come mainly from privately owned schools (among which 52.2% indicate that they have worsened, compared to 78.6% from public schools). All this suggests that there is a difference between the two sectors in Catalonia.

3.2 Equal opportunities in Catalonia

Based on the participants' answers we can see that there is a perception that in the last 10 years the education system in Catalonia has undergone a reduction in economic and human resources and that inequalities among students have increased. Therefore, we will now delve deeper into whether there are currently equal opportunities and, if not, what factors contribute to this situation.

In the opinion of 46.1% of the respondents, students in Catalonia enjoy equal opportunities in the education system, although 43.5% believe the contrary. A total of 9.4% said that "it depends" (that is, it is sometimes true and sometimes not), and 1.1% did not answer. However, the answers are not homogeneous; one of the main differences stems from, again, the ownership of the respondent's school. A total of 48.3% of respondents from public schools consider that there are not equal opportunities, compared to 30% from privately owned centers. At the same time, the lower the socio-economic level of families, the greater is the perception of inequality (38.9% of the respondents from centers with high-level families express this, compared to 40.6% with medium-level and 53.7% with low-level).

Respondents who indicated that the system did not guarantee equal opportunities were asked why they believed this was so. The question was open-ended and allowed multiple answers. This enabled us to compile a long list of reasons, which were grouped in thematic blocks. A total of 59.5% provided reasons attributable to the education system (22% lack of economic resources, 22% differences between centers⁴, 4.6% incorrect distribution of scholarships, 4.2% presence of disadvantaged students, among others) and 40.5% gave family reasons (37.6% family socio-economic status, 14.8% family cultural level, 1.7% family's attitude, among others). To specify further, all respondents were requested to answer an open-ended question asking, "What factors intervene in the fact that students in Catalonia do not have the same opportunities?" Blocks of factors were suggested, with the option to respond or not, in order to detect relevant aspects in each of them. Specifically, all respondents were asked about factors related to family context and the families themselves, the education system, the school and teaching staff and, finally, student-specific factors.

⁴ Specifically, 16.5% indicate organizational and operational differences between schools and 5.5% differences in human resources.

Before looking in details at each block, the following percentages complement what has been said above: 56.5% indicate contextual factors of families, 83.5% refer to actual family factors, 53% education system factors, 45.7% the center and its professionals, and 44% student-specific factors. As can be seen, although the responsibility for inequality is shared, factors attributed to families (outside the education system) are the most frequently mentioned by our respondents, in line with studies that show how families tend to be held responsible (read blamed) and that reflect the weight of families in school results (Fernández Alonso *et alii*, 2019; Escarbajal Frutos *et alii*, 2019; Corchuelo Fernández *et alii*, 2019; Elosua, 2019; Garreta 2016; Cordero Ferrara *et alii*, 2015; Ress & Azzolini, 2014). As shown in the following table, the comparison by ownership of the center demonstrates some difference; interviewees from public centers hold the education system, the school center and the family context somewhat more responsible, while those from private centers, in comparison, emphasize specific factors of families and students.

Table 3. Factors influencing the unequal opportunities of students

	Total	Center	
		Public	Private
Factors of the education system	53.0	54.1	49.6
Factors specific to schools	45.7	46.6	42.9
Contextual factors of the family	56.5	58.3	51.1
Concrete family factors	83.5	82.3	87.2
Student-specific factors	44.0	42.5	48.9

Source: Own elaboration.

As we have indicated, 56.5% mention the *context of families* as influential factors; i.e. where and how they live. Among them, 35.88% cite the socio-economic environment (to which 12.3% must be added, who referred specifically to the neighborhood in which the family resides), 27.9% the cultural environment, 3.7% the foreign origin of the family, and 2.8% and 2.2% specifically mention the physical characteristics and services of the neighborhood and housing, respectively. As we can see, socio-economic and cultural characteristics are the main contextual factors cited. These appear to be more influential when respondents refer specifically to the *family*: 58.3% consider that the socio-economic level of the family is influential and 27.3% the socio-cultural. In the other answers, 12.5% consider the family's educational model to be important,

13.4% cite family expectations and 12.1% say it depends on the degree of family involvement in the schooling of their children. In addition, 11.6% consider that the degree of family dysfunction is a conditioning factor, while 4.6% cite having a different family culture from that of most families in the center.

Factors contributing to the inequality of opportunity that are specific to the *education system* (remember that 53% believed that there were equal opportunities) include limited funding of education (19.1%), limited provision of teachers (10.5%), the way of assigning students in schools (7.5%), high class ratios (5.5%), insufficient provision of scholarships (4.6%), insufficient provision of support professionals (3.5%), inadequate school curriculum (2.8%), continuous legislative changes (2.4%), and the way of assigning teachers in the schools (2.2%), among other minor responses.

The factors specific to the *school and its professionals* (mentioned by 45.7%) are insufficient human (11.6%), economic (9.4%) and technological resources (6.1%). Factors attributable to teachers include their attitude (7.7%), incorrect work dynamics (7.3%), their training (5.9%), coordination with other professionals (1.7%), and the teaching methodology they employ (5.9%). The school's physical space was only mentioned by 3.9% of respondents, while performance of the management team was cited by 3.5%.

Finally, student-specific factors (mentioned by 44%) were led by individual intellectual abilities (16.4%), attitude towards learning (11.6%), their friendships (9%), physical abilities (6.1%), emotional stability and self-esteem (5.8%), and the degree of knowledge of the main language of communication in the center (1.8%), among other minor responses.

3.3 Actions taken to address equal opportunities

Another question focused on what is being done to equalize opportunities among students. All respondents were asked this question, which was open-ended and multiple answer. Naturally, a great diversity of responses was obtained, and actions were grouped as indicated in the following table. The first thing we observe is that there are very few (1.7%) centers that say they do not act in this direction. Among those that do act, the most frequent actions are individualized attention (40.2%), improved teaching methodology (23.7%), more academic support to specific student profiles (16.7%), and tutoring (11.9%); i.e., issues related to schools giving greater attention to students. To solve the socio-economic issue, respondents mentioned scholarships (36%), facilitating payment of fees and expenses (5.5%), and socialization of textbooks and school supplies (7%). All three cases were more prominent in public centers than in private ones,

in line with our previously presented results; and, in fact, socialization was only mentioned in public centers.

In addition, 22.4% aim to coordinate the work done by school professionals with the work done by professionals outside the center (educational psychologists, social workers, etc.). Here again, this occurs more in public than in private schools. Other actions focus on better informing families (7.2%), involving them more in the school (5.5%) or improving coordination/support of the center's management with the Parent Association (AMPA), in all three cases working with families. It is noteworthy that teacher training is also taken into account (6.2%).

Table 4. Main actions taken in schools for equalizing opportunities

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Center</i>	
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
No action	1.7	1.7	1.5
Coordination with external professionals	22.4	23.8	18.0
Scholarships and financial aid	36.0	37.4	31.6
Facilitate payment for families	5.5	5.8	4.5
Socialization of books and material	7.0	9.2	-
Individualized attention	40.2	39.1	43.6
Attention to cultural diversity	3.9	4.6	1.5
Improve teaching methodology	23.7	24.0	22.6
Curricular changes	3.7	3.4	4.5
Academic support for certain student profiles	16.7	17.2	15.0
Reception classroom	2.0	2.4	0.8
Linguistic support	2.0	1.9	2.3
Teacher training	0.7	0.5	1.5
Redistribution of staff	6.2	6.6	5.3
Information to families	7.9	7.0	10.5
Activities involving families	5.5	4.9	7.5
Coordination and support to the AMPA	4.8	5.6	2.3
Reception actions for students and families	2.0	2.2	1.5
Tutoring	11.9	11.2	14.3
Working with the environment	6.8	7.5	4.5
Others	2.9	2.7	3.8
DK/NA	0.2	0.2	-

Source: Own elaboration.

Those who act (remember that only 1.7% do not) were asked, again with an open or multiple response question, to which student profile they direct their actions for improving equal opportunities. The most common response was that the actions are aimed at the student body as a whole (54.7%), although 36% (a higher percentage in public centers than in private ones, as indicated in the following table) say they direct them towards students with socio-economic needs. Another of the majority responses (27.8%) points to students with learning difficulties, while only 1.3% mention high capacity students. Other profiles receiving attention are families (6.7%), in line with the previous actions carried out.

Table 5. Students towards whom actions are directed to improve equal opportunities

	Total	Center	
		Public	Private
All students	54.7	53.3	58.8
Recently arrived students (generally of foreign origin)	4.5	4.7	3.8
Students with socio-economic needs	36.0	39.8	24.4
Students with learning difficulties	27.8	29.1	23.7
High capacity students	1.3	1.2	1.5
Families	6.7	6.7	6.9
Teachers	0.2	-	0.8
Students with emotional needs	1.3	1.7	-
Others	1.3	1.5	0.8
DK/NA	6.2	5.9	6.9

Source: Own elaboration.

To go deeper into the aforementioned actions, we asked whether they thought that these actions were succeeding. A total of 69.9% said yes, 8.3% said it depends and 18% consider that they are not (1.8% did not answer and 1.8% indicate that they should not act). Differentiating, again, between the ownership of the respondent's work center, we observe that it is the public centers that question the success of the actions most (18.9% said no and 9.5% it depends) compared to private centers (15% no and 4.5% it depends).

Respondents who stated that actions were not sufficiently successful were asked why they felt this way. Their answers point to the aforementioned

limitation of existing resources: 34.4% state that economic resources are lacking, 33.6% human resources in the centers, and 11.9% that resources outside the center required for work are lacking. As seen in the table, economic resources are mentioned more among interviewees from public schools than from private ones. In addition, the idea that not enough effort is made for actions to be successful is expressed by 27.3%, a response more prominent in privately owned centers (42.4%, compared to 23.9%).

Table 6. Reason for stating that the actions are not successful

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Center</i>	
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
Lack of economic resources	34.3	35.9	26.9
Lack of human resources	33.6	33.3	34.6
Lack of external resources	11.9	11.1	15.4
Not enough effort is made	27.3	23.9	42.3
Not sufficiently tailored to needs	4.2	5.1	-
Families are not sufficiently involved in the schooling of children	9.8	10.3	7.7
Families are not involved in the AMPA	2.1	1.7	3.8
They do not improve academic results	3.5	2.6	7.7
Student equality is not achieved	4.2	5.1	-
They do not generate a better school climate	2.1	2.6	-
They do not generate a better intercultural climate	0.7	0.9	-
Others	5.6	6.8	-
DK/NA	9.1	9.4	7.7

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The economic crisis, as observed in previous studies as well as ours, has had an effect on equal opportunities in the Catalan education system. A total 72.3% of the directors surveyed consider that in recent years the economic resources directed at the most disadvantaged students (with greater needs) have been reduced. This situation is more evident in the public than in the private sector, given that the latter has a lower presence of low socio-economic status families. As we noted

in the text, school segregation, among other factors, is both cause and effect of the inequality that affects schoolchildren and families in school and, as we have already shown, more in public schools than in privately owned ones. Further, a higher percentage of public center respondents consider that equal opportunities do not exist (48.3% compared to 30% from privately owned centers).

The factors that influence the existence of inequalities among students are diverse, and the complexity and range of elements involved in studying them is shown throughout the article (Martínez Celorrió, 2016; Alegre, 2017; Albaigés & Ferrer-Esteban, 2017; OECD, 2018a). However, we have detected that, according to our respondents, the family environment and families themselves are the main influencing factors. In other words, most responsibility is placed outside the school, with less overall importance attributed to the school (45.7%). Nevertheless, factors related to the education system and the school and its professionals are also mentioned, although to a lesser extent. Students are also a factor that we have to consider, given the fact that equality does not exist because their capacities and attitudes are not equal. In public schools, student-specific factors are identified by 42.5%, while the figure is 48.9% in private centers. For this reason, we argue that the work done with students with greater learning difficulties, and particularly those who belong to minorities, is important for obtaining greater equity. Schools must observe the behaviors and reflection processes of students who overcome inequality of opportunities in order to have more references with which to act on crisis factors that affect the school.

In the preceding paragraph, we mentioned that respondents express that family-specific factors influence the inequality of opportunities most. In public centers, 82.3% consider the family responsible, while in private centers, the percentage rises to 87.2%. A total of 56.5% cited factors related to where and how families live as being influential, including the neighborhood and cultural environment, among others. In addition, respondents state that socio-economic (58.3%) and cultural (27.3%) characteristics are also the most relevant factors. These results reaffirm the importance, already expressed in previous works (Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013), of enhancing communication between families and the school to try to reduce the weight of these factors. The school and teaching staff should be a guide for families and students to commit themselves to schoolwork and to the behavior necessary for obtaining better academic results and more inclusive schooling.

As expected, given the situations and results presented, a variety of aspects are acted upon with different intensities; above all there is a focus on improving providing attention to students (individualized attention, improved

teaching methodology, more academic support and tutoring). The success of these measures appears high to 69.9% of respondents, although for others it is questionable or unsuccessful. The reasons for this are mainly related to the school's lack of financial and human resources, or external resources that should support its task.

In order for all these actions to enhance equal opportunities for students, they must be accompanied by the leadership of management teams in educational centers, especially in contexts of crisis and vulnerability. Leadership that, as we have stated previously (Walters *et alii*, 2003; Leithwood *et alii*, 2008), must be characterized by resilience (Day & Qing, 2015; Trujillo *et alii*, 2011; Cahill *et alii*, 2014) and by a culture of educational leadership based on cooperation that the educator should offer. The educator is shown to be an agent of change and is sensitive to the context in which the educational task is carried out, favoring collaborative work between internal and external agents of the school. The study shows that the actions the management teams are taking are valuable in a crisis scenario that has affected families' economic conditions. The reduction of social transfers, the increase in the indirect costs of education, the precariousness of life and employment and the greater weight of initial conditions all challenge, if not obstruct, the value of education as a tool of equity and equal opportunities.

The consequences of the 2008 economic crisis had an impact on the recent crisis of the covid-19 pandemic, which led to school closures in the final part of the 2019/20 school year (Bonal Sarró & González, 2021; Cabrera, 2021; Jacovkis & Tarabini, 2021; Sainz et al; 2021). There was an increase in the impact of social and educational inequalities, with the education system, and schools, their management teams and teachers, reacting through measures to mitigate their effects. The actions reflected in this study had to be increased to face this new scenario.

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