

Educational Policies and Equity: Debates, Perspectives, and Projections

Políticas educativas y equidad: debates, perspectivas y proyecciones

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The editors would like to thank REDIE for making an exception to its editorial policies and allowing us to make a call for papers for the thematic section included in this volume, which offers a broad view of the current conceptual, political, and empirical debate surrounding equity as a focus of education policy. In doing so, we hoped to better understand the main concerns regarding educational equity in Latin America today and how educational policies have responded to them.

This issue has become especially relevant due to the persistent and increasingly diverse nature of inequity, observed through multiple indicators of educational process globally but also most notably here in Latin America, the world's most unequal region.

Educational inequity persists in indicators of access to education, especially at the preschool and upper secondary levels. School dropout, especially in high schools, has remained stubbornly high and even worsened with the pandemic. But worst of all is that despite achieving universal primary education and near-universal lower secondary education in almost every country in the region, the learning gap persists, only decreasing in exceptional cases.

The groups harmed by educational inequity can be clearly identified: rural communities, native or Afro-descendant populations, students in marginalized urban areas, and increasingly in Latin America, people with disabilities and migrants, most of whom have been displaced by violence or a lack of opportunities in their places of origin.

We have made progress in clearly distinguishing between equality and equity. Equality means giving the same to everyone; equity is about securing the conditions and systematic measures necessary for all students to learn and develop, supporting the right to education from access to outcomes. This means giving more to those in greater need – more resources, but also more support and better relationships and teaching. The definition we propose here entails a particular stance on equity expectations in education, underpinned by the advances in theoretical and political discussions in recent decades.

However, this issue – in particular the work by Izquierdo-Álvarez and Martínez-Abad, and by Morales-Verdejo – confirms there is still no broad consensus on how educational equity can be conceptualized or operationalized for measurement. Perhaps for this very reason, nor is



there agreement on how educational equity should be interpreted for application in schools and classrooms. This conceptual problem is not new, as equity is both enriching and complex in that it can be understood as equality of opportunity, equality of processes, or equality of outcomes, growth, or preference satisfaction; it can be interpreted as providing a remedy or compensation, or as transformations for greater distributive, recognitional, and representational justice. Izquierdo-Álvarez and Martínez-Abad show us how equity is operationalized differently across international large-scale assessments: as the distance between different social groups in assessment results, or as the strength of the association between contextual and academic achievement variables. Recent efforts have sought to measure inequality in learning outcomes with the Gini index or estimate the influence of external variables on achievement. However, the lack of consensus on the meaning of this concept has likewise hindered efforts to establish a metric to evaluate the state of and progress toward educational equity.

The articles in this thematic issue also help to confirm that educational inequity persists in our region, which has prompted educational policies aimed at reducing it. In this context, policy clearly has an important role to play, and the work presented here allows a deeper understanding of educational policies by analyzing their implementation, a process during which they are reinterpreted by local actors: teachers, school authorities, and educational communities.

Inclusion offers an interesting avenue for research on the implementation of policies for educational equity. Work by Morales-Verdejo and by Cruz et al. has shown that as policies are reinterpreted by actors during the implementation process, the concept of inclusion can be filtered through a culturally entrenched notion of deficit. The intended beneficiaries are viewed from a deficit perspective, as individuals who need to be overprotected and treated differently, without high expectations of improvement. This results in a paradox whereby policies are reinterpreted and then produce the opposite effect to that intended, reinforcing stigmas and low expectations, and ultimately deepening inequality. Furthermore, research by Morales-Verdejo and by Chávez has pointed to a tendency toward an understanding of educational inclusion as supporting only students with special education needs, overlooking other forms of diversity (such as ethnic, nationality, and gender diversity) and leaving intact the tendency by schools to racialize and impose cultural homogeneity.

This reinterpretation phenomenon is compounded by other external and internal barriers that hamper the implementation of educational equity policies. The articles by Morales-Verdejo, Chávez, Cruz et al., Escobar et al., Cortés et al., and Rivero seek to cast light on and better understand these barriers, and while the policies they explore may differ, some of these barriers cut across these contributions. The most important **internal** barrier is inadequate teacher training to enact policies. This may seem obvious, but it is often forgotten that whatever fails to happen in the classroom fails to happen in education. Overcoming this barrier requires that teachers understand both the reasoning behind the policy and the implications of the policy for their teaching practice. In addition, the digital divide is becoming increasingly important as digital skills have become crucial both to access learning and to function in society, almost to the same extent as reading, writing, and mathematics. As artificial intelligence advances at breakneck speed, this is especially true. Further, the scant social recognition of teaching work is emerging as another obstacle to ensuring that teachers play a leading role in the education process.

External barriers are not limited to the socioeconomic dimension, which has been well established. They also include community culture, which is often opposed to controversial public policies – such as comprehensive sex education, as explained by Escobar et al. – but also influences the reinterpretation of policies through prejudices, hierarchies, and social



relations, often deterring school staff from properly applying public policy. In this sense, Cruz et al. highlight the barrier of rurality for policies designed within urban frameworks that fail to take into account the geographic dispersion, the mobility challenges, and the reality of conflict and violence in rural settings. At the same time, research by Mercado-Ruiz et al. explores the role of family and family conditions in failure avoidance in college students. Lastly, work by Rivero highlights the contradictions in the education system in addressing key tasks, such as when a judicializing perspective of school relationships is prioritized over a formative or democratic approach.

Especially interesting is the consensus among various authors that little importance is attached to pedagogical relations and practices in the implementation of equity policies. Izquierdo-Álvarez and Martínez-Abad observe this in efforts to measure inequity in learning, noting that more attention is given to contextual variables than to pedagogical ones, while Morales-Verdejo points to a tendency to favor administrative, diagnostic, and welfarist aspects over those related to teaching and learning. Chávez stresses the need for explicitly anti-racist, intersectional, and decolonial policies, and for trained teachers able to translate them into pedagogical and relational practices different from those they usually employ. Cruz et al. describe the challenges of implementing policies aimed at the inclusion of students with special educational needs, due to persistent stigmatization and low expectations among teachers, as well as a lack of support from school and community cultures for proper policy interpretation. Escobar et al. examine the varying degrees of appropriation of the rationale behind a comprehensive sex education policy and the corresponding pedagogical requirements, which are cross-cutting in nature.

Restoring the importance of teaching, making each student's learning the core focus, and recognizing and valuing their diversity are essential, but are not by themselves sufficient for educational equity policies to take root in classrooms and in schools.

In general, the contributors to this issue advocate policies that recognize the complexity of the phenomenon of educational inequity and its persistence, and adopt systemic, non-linear, and non-homogeneous perspectives to address it. Emphasis is placed on the need to value and distinguish diversities of all kinds. There is also a conviction that policies should fight educational inequity by tackling its root causes, such as racism, coloniality, and the lack of an intersectional vision.

In closing, we would like to reiterate the lack of consensus, noted at the outset, regarding the concept of educational inequity and how it should be addressed. This is exacerbated by the varying interpretations of policies among educators and within their communities.

Similarly, we stress the importance of further research into the implementation stage of policies. As the authors of this issue suggest, this should be done with a focus on how teachers appropriate these policies, as ultimately it is teachers who translate them into innovative teaching practices. Indeed, as Morales-Verdejo cautions, disregarding the complexity of policy implementation may even result in outcomes contrary to those expected.

The research findings presented in this special issue show that educational equity is more clearly envisioned as a normative or guiding principle, and as an expectation that is never fully realized.

Translation: Joshua Parker