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A review of international literature on educational inequalities and school management¹

Uma revisão da literatura internacional sobre desigualdades educacionais e gestão escolar

Una revisión de la literatura internacional sobre desigualdades educativas y gestión escolar

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Abstract

The article aims to present a survey of international studies and research produced on the relationship between educational inequalities and school management. Qualitative in nature, the study is the result of a doctoral thesis produced in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the State University of Ceará and covers the period from 1949 to 2021, considering the production of important reports on the topic, scientific articles and others relevant productions. The methodology adopted consisted of surveying productions in the international database Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), using the search engines in English “school management”, “educational inequality” and “public policies”. In addition to these productions, documents and research reports produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) were analyzed, through publications by Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE) and studies and research published based on results obtained from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), among other assessments. The results obtained show that the studies focus efforts on explaining the socio-spatial context and the relationships between school management and improving learning, in order to achieve reductions in social and/or educational inequalities. There is no agreement in the literature on the importance of the school's role, but there is a scenario in which school and education network management can adopt measures that help expand educational opportunities for all.

Keywords: *Educational Inequality. Educational management. School management. International Studies.*

Resumo

O artigo tem como objetivo apresentar um levantamento dos estudos e das pesquisas internacionais produzidas sobre a relação entre desigualdades educacionais e gestão escolar. De natureza qualitativa, o estudo é fruto de uma tese de doutorado produzida no Programa de Pós-graduação em Educação, na Universidade Estadual do Ceará, e compreende o período entre 1949 e 2021, considerando a produção de relatórios importantes sobre o tema, artigos científicos e outras produções relevantes. A metodologia adotada consistiu em levantamento de produções junto à base de dados internacional Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), utilizando os buscadores em inglês “school management”, “educational inequality” e “public policies”. Além dessas produções, foram analisados documentos e relatórios de pesquisas produzidas pela Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura (UNESCO), por meio das publicações do Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE) e dos estudos e das pesquisas publicadas tendo como base de dados resultados obtidos no Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) da Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico (OCDE), dentre outras avaliações. Os resultados obtidos mostram que os estudos centram esforços para a explicação do contexto socioespacial e as relações entre gestão escolar e melhoria das aprendizagens, de forma a alcançar reduções de desigualdades sociais e/ou educacionais. Não há consenso na literatura sobre a importância do papel da escola, mas se observa um cenário em que a gestão escolar e a rede de ensino podem adotar medidas que auxiliem na ampliação das oportunidades educacionais para todos.

Palavras-chave: Desigualdade Educacional. Gestão Educacional. Gestão Escolar. Estudos Internacionais.

Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un panorama de los estudios e las investigaciones internacionales producidos sobre la relación entre las desigualdades educativas y la gestión escolar. De carácter cualitativo, el estudio es resultado de una tesis doctoral realizada en el Programa de Posgrado en Educación de la Universidad Estadual de Ceará y abarca el período de 1949 a 2021, considerando la producción de importantes informes sobre el tema, artículos científicos y otros relevantes. La metodología adoptada consistió en encuestar producciones en la base de datos internacional Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), utilizando los motores de búsqueda en inglés “school management”, “educational desigual” y “public schools”. Además de estas producciones, se analizaron documentos e informes de investigación elaborados por la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (UNESCO), a través de publicaciones del Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE) y estudios e investigaciones publicados con base en sobre los resultados obtenidos del Programa para la Evaluación

Internacional de Estudiantes (PISA) de la Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico (OCDE), entre otras evaluaciones. Los resultados obtenidos muestran que los estudios centran esfuerzos en explicar el contexto socioespacial y las relaciones entre la gestión escolar y la mejora del aprendizaje, con el fin de lograr reducciones de las desigualdades sociales y/o educativas. No hay consenso en la literatura sobre la importancia del papel de la escuela, pero existe un escenario en el que la gestión de la escuela y de la red educativa puede adoptar medidas que ayuden a ampliar las oportunidades educativas para todos.

Palabras clave: *In the last line, 3 to 5 keywords must be indicated separated by dot.*

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the international literature on the relationship between school management and educational inequalities. It is framed by the contextualization of the origins of the research field on educational inequality and highlights the most representative works, specifying the period and context in which they occur. The *corpus* includes documents and reports from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), publications from *Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE)* and studies based on data obtained from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This work also considers additional research, whose findings emphasize aspects related to educational inequalities.

In recent years, studies conducted by international organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2023), have presented strategies to address inequalities based on analyses of concrete cases. Among those, a key focus is the training of school leaders to promote equitable learning practices. (UNESCO, 2025a; 2025b).

The following discussion is based on two central aspects. First, it reinforces the debate on educational inequality, which was amplified by social segregation during the Covid-19 pandemic. This context brought greater visibility to learning disparities, placing educational inequality as both a significant field of investigation and a strategic focus of public education policies. For Marinho (2022) the term “inequality” covers multiple meanings, including socio-spatial condition, gender, race/color, as well as inequalities associated with intra-school factors, such as learning.

The second aspect focuses on the role of schools and educational systems in addressing disparities and ensuring equitable access to education. This literature review provides an opportunity to deepen the debate on educational inequality from an international perspective.

The methodology involved consulting the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database using the search terms “school management,” “educational inequality,” and “public policies.” Quotation marks were used to combine terms, along with the Boolean operator AND. The search period selected was “Since 2002”, covering the last 20 years. A total of 12 articles and one book were identified, all published in international journals, which contribute to the analysis of the debate on educational inequalities.

For the sake of organization, this article is divided into six main sections. This introduction(1); the context in which studies on educational inequalities emerge(2); a discussion of studies conducted within the framework of *Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE)*(3); some studies considering PISA (OECD) data(4); studies that address schools and social inequalities(5), and final remarks(6).

The emergence of studies on educational inequalities

The historical context of educational inequalities can be seen in the research carried out the 1950s in France, the United States and England². This section presents the chronology of studies that support this topic in educational systems and their contributions to this field of investigation.

In 1950, research led by Alain Girard at the National Institute for Demographic Studies (*Institut National d'Études Démographiques - Ined*) brought ideas about issues associated with the family profile of school-age children, social mobility, and family needs. He presented evidence of the influence of families' school trajectories, or their professional and economic profiles, on the learning outcomes and educational

²It is important to mention that the debate on educational inequality was already present in studies conducted in Belgium, Canada, Great Britain, Switzerland, and Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s (Crahay & Baye, 2013). However, the most mentioned are those carried out in the US, France, and England. For this reason, the present analysis focuses specifically on studies produced in these countries.

opportunities of French children and young people (Girard, 1949; 1950a; 1950b; 1951; Stoetzel & Girard, 1950). Years later, these ideas helped shape a distinct field of sociological study in France

In 1964, a work by Bourdieu and Passeron, called *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (*Les Héritiers: Les étudiants et la culture*), appeared in the context of educational changes. It attempted to clarify questions about the preservation of social inequalities within educational systems, questioning the idea of a democratic school that would enable students to achieve social mobility. By analyzing data from a university, the authors claim that factors such as the social origin and cultural heritage of students' families influence the success or failure of their educational trajectories and enrollment. The findings indicate the need to understand the relationship between inequalities and school.

In 1966, Bourdieu reinforced his ideas by publishing *The Conservative School: Inequalities in Education and Culture* (*L'école conservatrice. Les inégalités devant l'école et la culture*) in which he points out that the school system tends to be "One of the most effective factors of social conservation, as it gives an appearance of legitimacy to social inequalities and sanctions cultural inheritance and social gift as if they were natural talents." (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 45).

The author writes about the inheritance of cultural capital from families and explains that, in addition to the level of education of families, "it is the overall cultural level of the family group that has the closest relationship with the child's success at school" (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 46). In this way, he demonstrates that families' attitudes and perceptions regarding their children's educational trajectories have a direct impact on the academic paths of these students. Depending on the extent to which cultural capital is transmitted across generations, this will influence both the continuity and the advancement of their children's educational development.

The study also indicates that children of working-class families face greater challenges in accessing quality education and continuing their studies because they have their destiny driven by *habitus*, a concept that represents both a reflection of objective structures and the relationship individuals keep with durable dispositions. Sometimes those are shaped by social structures, other times by individual responses and life experiences.

Two other studies also carried out in the mid-1960s became reference on the subject of educational inequalities: the Coleman Report, entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), which presents data from the United States, and the Plowden Report, called *Children and Their Primary School* (1967), bringing data from England.

The first is a collection of information required in response to Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which enabled a production of a survey and report on the "lack of availability of equal educational opportunities to individuals on the basis of race, color, religion, or nationality in public educational institutions at all levels in the United States [...]." It was done with about 500,000 American students enrolled in primary and secondary schools across the country. Data was collected from teachers, school administrators and parents. It confirms that "socioeconomic differences between students are responsible for differences in their performance, and the hope of combating racial inequality through better distribution of investments in education would be a chimera" (Brooke; Soares, 2008, p. 15).

The study states that schools in the US act as agents in the reproduction of social inequalities.. Schools alone cannot meet the demands for more equal learning opportunities for all, since these issues are strongly affected by students' economic and social factors. Differences in the location of schools do not explain the inequality of learning measured by standardized tests (Brooke; Soares, 2008).

Over half a century has gone by since the publication of the Coleman Report, and questions associated with the field of the Sociology of Education, raised by him, still have an impact. According to Higgins (2005, p. 117), the report states that "public investment in education has come under suspicion of inefficiency. Thus, the perspective of social capital from the point of view of primary bonds, private life in the family and community life, would provide the best evidence of school success."

Plowden (1967) presented the state of art on the quality of elementary schools and was commissioned by the British Ministry of Education, "with the aim of identifying tendencies and suggest

changes" to this stage of education (Brooke; Soares, 2008, p. 18). The research was conducted at a time of intense discussion about more humanistic approaches to education, such as the implementation of a "new pedagogical culture" focused on the student. Underlying issues at the time strongly influenced the discussions and results, which reinforced the argument that "schools were the right solution to the problems of the hypercenters of large cities. However, in these cases, with underprivileged students, schools needed to be different, in the sense of being better and more expensive than regular schools." (Brooke; Soares, 2008, p. 19).

In contrast to Coleman, the England study presented a more optimistic view of the school. Though, its impression was not supported by the text. The empirical study considered 173 elementary and mixed schools. From this sample, 3,000 participants were selected, including students from the final year of kindergarten, those in the early grades of elementary school, and their parents. The research was organized into three categories: parental attitudes, home conditions and school conditions. The results showed that the school makes a minimal difference to the students' academic performance, with other variables being indicated as more important in explaining these differences, such as the students' socio-economic and family conditions. For Brooke and Soares (2008), the report does not suggest that school is irrelevant, but that other factors are more important, such as parents' attitudes towards their children's education.

Family participation in their children's educational process, involvement in school activities, the level of literacy and reading habits experienced at home have an influence on students' learning results. Household structure, family income and the parents' educational qualifications were also mentioned in the study as factors that affect the students' academic performance. One aspect that calls attention is the association with the neighborhood where the school is located. The influence of the territorial dynamics of its surroundings has an impact on the dimension of the students' educational opportunities.

Regarding the territory effect, it is important to mention Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson in "The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems" (1965). Based on a fieldwork conducted in a rural community in England, the study revealed the diversity of communities and families within the same area. These groups differ in terms of social status, beliefs, and values, which creates a hierarchical framework for categorizing family types and examining their interactions within the local environment. The analysis seeks to illustrate the differences between social groups identified as "the established", those who "hold positions of prestige and power"—and the "outsiders", described as "non-members of the 'good society,'" those who are outside of it. The "outsiders" are presented as "a heterogeneous and diffuse group of individuals" (Elias & Scotson, 2000, p. 7). According to the researchers, this classificatory dynamic, shaped by families' socioeconomic profiles and their communities, influences young people's lives and choices.

The analysis explains issues associated with social status and the perceptions of communities in the same territory about the different types of families. Within these communities, individuals believe that there are superior and inferior groups in the same social context, reinforcing segregation. Belonging to the "outsiders" affects the dynamics of individuals' choices and their life journeys. There is a hidden hierarchy that differentiates them socially even in small territories as neighborhoods, communities, villages, etc.

Such differences feed social inequality, leading to struggles and disputes which, for "outsiders", can lead to more suffering and social discredit. Even in contexts of high social vulnerability and poverty, where the population suffers more intensely from the lack of social rights, there are internal hierarchies that work in these territories and redefine rules, attitudes and conditions for their population. This field of power competes with others, including the state and its efforts to implement public policies for these communities.

As an example, in 1965, the U.S. government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which described actions to improve education for students considered "disadvantaged." This document marked an important moment in the history of American education and was part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" campaign, where education was seen as a key tool in fighting poverty. It clearly stated the idea that the cycle of poverty could "be broken if the educational efforts directed at disadvantaged students are strengthened and modified with additional resources" (US, 1965, p. 8). The goal

was to compensate for a kind of “deficiency” that wasn’t physical, but rather “social and cultural,” by expanding public education programs (Robert, 2007, s.p.).

In the same year, the United States implemented the “Head Start” program, which focused on raising the level of children living in poverty to match that of children from more advantaged backgrounds by offering preschool education. The program remains active and offers a variety of services structured in three core pillars: early learning and development, health, and family well-being. However, there is no consensus in studies about the program and its impact on the learning outcomes of participating children (U.S, 1997; 2005; 2018).

Another political program to face educational inequalities was the creation of the Zones of Priority Education (*Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire - ZEP*), in France during the 1980s. Implemented by Education Minister Alain Savary in the government of social democrat François Mitterrand, the ZEP was meant to compensate for the educational inequalities of students living in “zones” of high social vulnerability. As Robert (2007) points out, these initiatives focus on the implementation of compensation policies, which “are based on a selective mechanism for funding public education actions, in order to compensate for the disadvantage of poverty” (s. p.).

These were the initial steps that appeared in the literature on educational inequality, with political actions aimed at combating it. On the other hand, these public policy experiences have not been entirely successful and have not led to changes in the situation of educational inequality for poor students who most depend on public education systems (Broccolichi; Ben Ayed; Trancart, 2010). In fact, these ideas reinforced the state's control over educational institutions, by expanding supervision, and fostered the “employability” movement and greater distribution of resources to teachers (Robert, 2007).

In 1970, Bourdieu and Passeron published *Reproduction: in education, society and culture (La reproduction)*. The book presents the theory of symbolic violence as the basis for the finding that schools contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. In this way, he says that the pedagogical and institutional practices implemented by the schools reproduce and validate the dominant culture.

These practices are then passed on during the school life of the children in lower classes as a form of hidden, symbolic violence that is masked in the discourse, gestures and relations of power in which educational institutions operate, reinforcing the roles of the dominant and the dominated. Inside school institutions, mechanisms of exclusion are created for children and young people, limiting their access to educational experiences that would guarantee the expansion and continuation of their cultural, educational and family legacies.

The authors oppose the idea that the school is a neutral institution, responsible for transmitting knowledge to everyone without distinction. When the school treats everyone equally, it ignores the social contrast that affects its public. Variations in social class lead students to differences in access to social and cultural capital. These are amplified when the school denies unequal conditions and when it attributes the success and failure of its students to individual merit. In this way, the education system supports the process of preserving the social status of the dominant classes.

- a) The studies analyzed so far present a diversity of complementary arguments regarding the role of schools in reducing educational inequalities. The improvement in the educational performance of individuals is associated with external factors such as income, the cultural and educational level of families and socio-economic conditions. Findings to better think about these inequalities are summarized in the following statements:
- b) The process of democratizing access to education has not led to the expansion of opportunities for the poorest. Instead, it has intensified social and economic differences within education systems and their schools, and has resulted in the reproduction of inequalities;
- c) Socio-spatial inequality is an explanatory factor in studies and deserves a special place, as well as in the discourse and implementation of public policies;

- d) The school does not explain student performance outcomes. Therefore, external factors have the greatest influence on learning, particularly the socioeconomic profile of low-income students' families;
- e) As observed in both the United States and France, the belief that expanding more effective public policies would reduce educational inequalities for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has not reached the expected results;
- f) The adoption of teaching methods that not only consider the dominant cultural legacy but also expand access to education for children and young people could help create a more democratic educational system.

From the 1970s to the 1980s, in order to complement the ideas discussed in these pioneer studies, case studies and investigations of local experiences emerged to understand the possibilities for schools to take action for improvement. One of them, by Stephen Heynemann and William Loxley (1983), intends to explore various influences on student results in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, presenting the effect of the quality of primary education on academic performance in 29 high and low-income countries. They found that elementary school children in low-income countries learn less than children in high-income ones. The lower the country's income, the less influence the students' socio-economic profile has on their academics.

In this sense, in poorer countries, the quality of schools and elementary school teachers has a greater effect on learning. These findings are not general but deserve attention in the search for factors associated with success and education. Over the years, these findings have appeared to a greater or lesser extent in international studies, sometimes trying to explain the impact of schools, especially in socially vulnerable contexts, and other times highlighting the effects of family background on students' academic lives.

Studies from the Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE)

Regarding studies that explain the importance of schools in reducing learning inequalities, the *Laboratorio Latino-Americano por la Calidad de La Educación (LLECE)* of the Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Orealc/Unesco Santiago) has been analyzing student learning outcomes in different Latin American and Caribbean countries for over 25 years. These documents indicate the main factors associated with educational performance that "are responsible for several aspects related to the quality of education, and meet the challenges of the Education 2030³ Agenda" (Unesco, n. p.).

These also outline their conceptions of quality education, as can be observed in Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (*Tercer Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo - Terce*). According to the document: "[...] quality education encompasses efficiency (optimizing resource use), equity (fair distribution of benefits), relevance (meeting societal needs), and pertinence (meeting student needs)". (Unesco, 2015, p. 2).

The LLECE has performed a series of comparative investigations into factors associated with improved academic performance in Latin American and Caribbean countries, using indicators and results obtained from large-scale assessments, combining information from socio-economic questionnaires with teachers, parents and students. .

The First International Comparative Study on Language, Mathematics, and Associated Factors in Third and Fourth Grade (*Primer Estudio Internacional Comparativo sobre Lenguaje, Matemática y Factores Asociados em Terceroy Cuarto Grado*) (2000) presents findings from eleven Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, the Dominican

³ More information about the Education 2030 Agenda: Education 2030 in Brazil. Available at (unesco.org).

Republic, and Venezuela). The analyses considered the learning averages in language (spanish and/or portuguese) and mathematics, which are combined with the variables of parents' level of education, the availability of school resources, teacher and student opinion, illiteracy rates and the country's average level of schooling.

The variables associated with school resources, the country's illiteracy and schooling rates lead to an understanding of the effect of schools on reducing learning inequalities, especially in poor countries. In all regions, the most effective schools tend to be those with high levels of school resources: classrooms that are not multi-grade, low levels of performance-based grouping, frequent testing in the classroom, high levels of family involvement, a good classroom environment and discipline (Willms; Somer, 2001).

In the 2000s, LLECE replicated the same analyses with thirteen countries, including indicators from Costa Rica and Peru. The scope was extended to include data from students' parents or guardians, teachers, school principals and entire institutions. The results revealed a number of factors that influence student learning:

- 1)The student and their family context (traits, commitment, habits, and skills of the student and their immediate family; 2) The teacher and the educational environment (variables related to curriculum and pedagogical management carried out by the teacher in the classroom); 3) The principal and the school microcosm (factors underpinning institutional management processes within the school and 4) Public authorities and the macrocosm (aspects related to the public management of institutions at the national level) (UNESCO; LLECE, 2000, p. 12).

The difference in performance between schools was verified based on the socio-economic profile of the students. It was found that the school effect is relevant in reducing the socio-economic inequalities. The students' perception of the classroom environment has a greater influence on learning than other factors. Schools with more resources, such as books in libraries, have better performance results, but the mere availability of resources is not enough. Good management and its inputs is needed, so that all students have access to the facilities, focusing on the pedagogical, property and administrative dimensions.

Qualitative Study of Schools with Outstanding Results in Seven Latin American Countries (*Estudio cualitativo de escuelas con resultados destacables en siete países latino-americanos*) (UNESCO, 2002), reiterates the LLECE's concern to understand the school effect, especially the issues associated with the management of the institution and how it is organized. It looked at experiences in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba and Venezuela, investigating 10 schools in each country that met the criteria of the greatest distance between their results in math tests and their parents' level of education.

The first topic is "School management at school level" and underlines the importance of enhancing the relationship between family, school and community, through the participation of parents, students, teachers and other groups. The administration which fosters a positive organizational climate offers positive conditions for improving student performance. The more people participate in schools' organizational processes, the better their results.

In 2002, Juan Casassus published a book entitled *A escola e a desigualdade*, which discusses findings presented by LLECE in 14 Latin American countries from 1995 to 2000. He brings up cases associated with school success, focusing on aspects such as family, social, cultural and economic context, the differences between schools among other variables. He also emphasizes conditions that promote better academic performance: school infrastructure, availability of enough teaching materials, books for all students, few students per class, autonomous school management, better teacher training and autonomy, collective responsibility for student success and/or failure, large-scale assessment policies, reduction of segregation, community and family involvement in the educational process and an a supportive learning environment.

In 2013, LLECE carried out the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (*Segundo Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo - SERCE*) and produced the report Factors Associated with Learning in the SERCE: Analysis of Latent Factors and Their Link to the Academic Outcomes of Children

(*Factores asociados al aprendizaje en el serce: análisis de los factores latentes y su vínculo con los resultados académicos de los niños*). The research covers 16 Latin American countries and analyzed data from large-scale tests in language, mathematics and science, and questionnaires applied to families, students, teachers, principals and schools. It was found that, for sixth grade students, the level of classroom management is an important variable in explaining the difference in performance at both academic and socio-economic levels. The limitations of schools in the face of social inequalities show that socio-economic and cultural levels affect student learning.

The report listed “contextual factors” as those associated with the student's socio-economic profile, their home environment, the ethnic group and others. Sometimes these are constitutive of the students, and at other times they are practices that can be modified, for example, reading habits with the family. As for the educational processes within the school, the most important in explaining the differences in performance between students are: school environment, classroom organization and teacher satisfaction with their working conditions and salary.

It was observed that the school impact is not as present as the factors associated with students' socio-economic issues. We can say that both school and socio-economic are important aspects in understanding educational inequality. School management emerges as a potential means of reshaping the conception of education and organizing schools in a way to expand the educational opportunities for all.

LLECE conducted another study (TERCE), in 2015. Looking at results from 15 countries and one sub-national state. The study deals with a topic that has not yet been presented in other reports: violence in schools, which has a negative influence on learning. Beyond these, it was observed that the school environment persists as a positive variable in students' academic performance, as does the participation of parents in their children's school career. The educational systems investigated are not very inclusive when looking at the socio-economic profiles of the students “since it is unlikely that students from different social backgrounds can be found in the same school” (Unesco, 2015, p. 8).

Studies based on PISA data

Chiu e Khoo (2005) carried out an analysis of the resources available at country, family and school level and their possible influence on students' academic performance, considering the category of distribution of opportunities. The study involved 15-year-olds from 41 different countries, who took tests in math, reading and science, and completed a socio-economic questionnaire. Using multilevel regression analysis the study found that more privileged students, who had greater access to resources in their country, family or school, scored higher in the tests. On the other hand, students from more unequal countries scored lower.

The unequal distribution of opportunities for students most favored those considered privileged, as they attended schools with more facilities, reinforcing the economic differences in their profiles. When the effect of parents' work status on students' academic performance was analyzed, it was found that this element has a strong influence, bringing differences between groups of students from the same school and the same country. In short, the study concluded that the possibility of a more equal distribution of opportunities among students cannot be observed in a fragmented way.

Similar issues were seen by Montt (2011) when he noted that, while educational inequality is not widely discussed in the literature, education systems also play an important role in the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. The author took PISA data from 50 educational systems and identified that the more homogeneous allocation of good teachers who have higher professional qualifications and the expansion of pedagogical support help to reduce the disparity of learning results.

Focusing on the efficiency of education systems to improve learning rates, a study done by the OECD (2008) also shows that the qualification of teachers is a factor that increases the success of education networks. This factor is also reflected in the greater autonomy of schools, the training of managers, the

implementation of clearer regulations for the use and application of education networks, among other measures.

Also considering PISA results from 2000 and 2006 from 4 European countries, Oppedisano and Turati (2015) concluded that there was a reduction in inequality in two education systems characterized as “decentralized”: Germany and Spain. In contrast, in “centralized” systems, such as those in France and Italy, inequality increased. Another aspect of the study is that the characteristics of the schools observed over the years have an impact on the indicators of educational inequality, in addition to those already mentioned in the studies, such as family background.

The way education systems are managed is a big part of the discussion. Both management and leadership are seen in international studies as key factors in whether education succeeds or fails. The findings point to the importance of organizing and implementing public policies effectively to improve this scenario.

Dorn *et al.* (2017) present some factors that influence school success in Latin America, based on the analysis of the 2015 PISA results in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay. The study lists a number of findings that center around student performance: 1) Students' mentality about the educational process affects school results almost twice as much as socio-economic background; 2) Students whose education is a mix of their own inquiry and teacher-led instruction get the best results; 3) Although technology can support student learning outside of school, the effects of its use inside schools are ambiguous. The best results are achieved when technology is placed in the hands of teachers; 4) Extending the school day to up to seven hours helps to improve results. However, important benefits can also be obtained by making better use of the current timetable; and 5) Early childhood education has had a positive academic impact on young people who are now 15 years old; still, low-income students have benefited less than high-income students.

This last result is explained by the fact that the best-performing low-income students only entered kindergarten from the age of 4, which means that greater investment in expanding kindergarten access for the poorest would reduce the learning inequalities observed. Pedagogical practices used by teachers when oriented towards the process to stimulate students' interest help to improve outcomes. The findings point to new directions in the debate on school effectiveness and educational inequality.

Other studies on schools and social inequalities

In terms of the equal and fairer distribution of educational opportunities for all, Marcel Crahay's study (2004), aims to answer the question: Can schools be fair and effective? The author begins his analysis of school justice based on the principle of equality, which he distinguishes as: equality of opportunity, treatment and knowledge. The author gathers empirical data that demonstrates possible solutions to reducing educational inequalities: eliminating failure during basic education; promoting automatic approval of students; creating a single organizational structure for secondary education and limiting the freedom of parents to choose schools, which he calls sectorization.

Crahay (2004) states that the process of sectorization will only be possible if the population distributed in the territory where the school is located does not show many social differences. This is impossible to monitor, especially when the supply of private schools is lower than that of public ones, so that there is greater interference in the organization of educational systems. Some of these reflections open the way for analyzing the impact of socio-spatial inequality on educational outcomes.

Chudgar e Luschei (2009) observed that both international and comparative education literature do not agree that schools are important in explaining differences in student learning. They studied the subject in 25 countries, by monitoring the results of large-scale math and science tests with fourth-graders, different from the PISA. For them, the family background variable matters more than schools in understanding differences in educational performance. In contexts of poverty and inequality, schools are

significant variables because they can help reduce learning difficulties in children from high and low socio-economic backgrounds.

Ben Ayed (2012) investigated the French context and identified that the relationship between territorial segregation and unequal educational opportunities was based on a logic of competition between schools. In this way, a network of schools with more homogeneous students than others was formed on a territorial basis, reinforcing inequalities in the student composition of each institution. If the school was located in a more vulnerable area, it was less attractive to students and their families.

Lavrijsen e Nicaise (2016) argue that the process of separating students between schools or by skills in the same school, does not improve academic performance. The international literature also highlights another procedure known as “grouping”, which is the organization of students into specific groups based on shared characteristics, abilities, or needs. These practices tend to increase inequality and reduce the possibilities of learning new things that can emerge from the differences between students in class.

In the same perspective, Owens, Reardon and Jencks (2016), Owens (2018) and Jang and Reardon (2019) seek to understand income segregation between schools and school districts. The researchers used multiple sources of data from the American education system and concluded that the increase in income inequality contributed to the increase in income segregation between schools and districts. The more unequal the distribution of income between districts, the greater the inequality in schools in that territory. This finding may have implications for students' unequal access to resources that influence the improvement of academic results.

When looking at the differences between high- and low-income black and white students in contexts of segregation, Owens (2018) finds that color differences are reinforced in the socio-spatial distribution of white and black families in the United States. Since only the first, with high incomes, live in the wealthy districts created by income inequality, while the second, even with identically high incomes, live in districts similar to those of low-income white families. These socio-spatial inequalities contribute to differences in educational achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Dumont and Douglas (2020) mentions that, in addition to the divergent views on the importance or not of schools, one must take into consideration the problems developed by these studies, which often neglect students' initial learning as an important factor in analyzing the role of the institution. Sempé (2021) asserts that school inequality can be measured if we take into account not only the results of external evaluations, but also other variables, which are important in explaining this phenomena.

Downey (2021) in his work “How Schools ‘Really’ Matter”, provides a picture of how little the school explains the differences in performance observed in large-scale tests. Other variables associated with social inequality or poor income distribution have a greater influence on the gaps in results between students, schools and education systems. For the author, the vision of the whole is greatly reduced when schools are blamed for social problems, which creates a scenario of escaping from reality. In turn, it is easier for governments to reaffirm that schools are at fault than to start thinking about broad-ranging economic and social reforms, since they would be more costly for public authorities.

The literature review indicates that the socio-economic profile of families and their influence on educational results are common in studies in the field of educational inequality and are repeated as findings in almost all international productions. It places them at the center of the process that shapes learning inequalities, or as factors that correlate with the impact of schools. It was demonstrated that the relationship between family income and students' academic results intensified between the 1980s and 1990s, but not only are these indicators relevant to explaining educational inequality, but so are the introduction of curriculum standards and the levels of poverty and inequality in the areas where students and their families live (Chmielewski; Reardon, 2016).

Other authors have emphasized that inequality in the family context and inequality at school are distinct issues appearing in parallel in studies in the field of education, but they must be resolved separately, emphasizing that “family inequality” is problematic and complex to be addressed by educational policies, otherwise many resources will be invested with little or no efficiency in improving this scenario. The priority

is to develop actions in education systems, such as better distribution of education professionals and their qualification (Chiu, 2015).

It has been observed that student participation in external evaluations provides valuable data, including insights into their family context and their perceptions of schools and classroom practices. This data is crucial for analyzing education systems and schools on an international level.

Final Remarks

All these studies, which aimed to contribute to the discussion on managing educational inequalities, lead to the following conclusions:

- a) The literature on school effectiveness and success contributes to the debate on managing educational inequality, emphasizing factors that increase and/or reduce it;
- b) The expansion of international research on educational inequality has been driven by the increasing availability of data from large-scale assessments of education systems and schools;
- c) There is no consensus on the role of schools in reducing educational inequality among students. However, schools play a significant role, particularly in contexts characterized by high social disparity;
- d) The school effect cannot be observed unilaterally, so it is necessary to consider the context in which the institution is located, the profile of its students and the level of learning at the entrance and exit;
- e) A more collaborative and involved school management and the presence of a leadership that promotes a positive school environment for students and teachers, establishing a good relationship with families and the community, helps to reduce the differences in student learning.

The management of education systems is important in reducing inequalities, whether by defining compensatory public policies or by introducing curricular, training and teacher assignment measures. Experiences of compensatory public policies to combat poverty and social inequality have not had the desired effect in expanding educational opportunities for the public they serve, and have been a temporary measure, lasting through governments, but failing to solve structural problems.

Several studies focus on the importance of schools in reducing inequalities. In addition, a broader range of research contributes to the debate by analyzing the territorial effect, while others explore differences in academic performance. The productions highlight the importance of the socio-spatial dimension in the study of schools. The context in which they are located says a lot about the way they are organized and how they are seen by the community. In vulnerable areas, schools are often the only place where people and their children have access to culture, education, sport and leisure.

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