

THE INEQUALITIES FACING FOREIGN STUDENTS IN SPANISH COMPULSORY EDUCATION: A CRITICAL VIEW FROM THEORY OF CARE

Las desigualdades del alumnado extranjero en la educación obligatoria española. Una visión crítica desde la teoría del cuidado

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the educational inequalities between foreign and native students in Spanish compulsory education in learning competences, repeating years and early school leaving. These inequalities lead to social exclusion. The basic thesis of this article is that the social exclusion that foreign students suffer from contrasts with the insufficiency of the means provided for their learning processes and the inadequate assessment tools. This disconnection is the result of the predominance of

liberalism and neo-liberalism in the education system. The theory of care is proposed as an alternative for understanding the root of the problem and proposing guidelines for solving it. The introduction sets out why this issue is important, the precursors in the research literature that considers it and the relevance of the theory of care for understanding it. The methodology describes the criteria for selecting international and national bibliographical sources and argues that the hermeneutic method is valid for the ethical and political interpretation of the theory of care. The results confirm the educational gap in cognitive skills (mathematics, science and reading), repeating years and early school leaving. We discuss the results from two perspectives: we compare the results with the results of current research on the problem in Spain, and we critique them from the theory of care. The conclusions refer to the questions formulated in the objectives regarding educational inequalities and their effect on social exclusion, and to the proposal of the theory of care as an alternative to the proposals of learning and evaluation from liberal and neo-liberal theories.

Keywords: ethics; child care; social integration; education; school failure; foreign students; hermeneutics.

RESUMEN

El artículo describe las desigualdades educativas entre el alumnado extranjero y nativo en la Educación Obligatoria española: en el aprendizaje de competencias, repetición de curso y abandono escolar temprano. Esas desigualdades producen exclusión social. La tesis fundamental argumenta la incoherencia entre los medios insuficientes para los procesos de aprendizaje del alumnado extranjero, los inadecuados instrumentos de su evaluación y la sanción de exclusión social que padece. La incoherencia se produce por la vigencia del liberalismo y neoliberalismo en el sistema educativo. Se propone la Teoría del Cuidado como alternativa para comprender la raíz del problema y proponer orientaciones para su solución. La introducción argumenta la importancia del problema, los antecedentes de la literatura de la investigación que lo plantea y la pertinencia de la Teoría del Cuidado para su comprensión. La metodología describe los criterios para la selección de las fuentes bibliográficas, internacionales y nacionales, y argumenta la validez del método hermenéutico para la interpretación ética y política de la Teoría del Cuidado. Los resultados confirman la brecha educativa en competencias cognitivas (matemáticas, científicas y lectoras), en repeticiones de curso y en abandono escolar temprano. La discusión de los resultados se hace desde dos perspectivas: se confrontan con los resultados de investigaciones actuales sobre el problema en España; y se hace una crítica a los mismos desde la Teoría del Cuidado. Las conclusiones hacen referencia a las preguntas formuladas en los objetivos sobre las desigualdades educativas y su incidencia en la exclusión social; y a la propuesta de la Teoría del Cuidado como alternativa a las propuestas del aprendizaje y evaluación desde las teorías liberales y neoliberales.

Palabras clave: ética; cuidado; integración social; educación; fracaso escolar; alumno extranjero; hermenéutica.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone who lives in Spain – native or foreign, with or without documentation – has a legally recognised right to compulsory education. Foreign students are defined as ones who do not have Spanish nationality. As a result of the alternation of political parties in governments over the last 53 years (since 1970) and other circumstances, nine non-university Organic Education Acts have been enacted; this series of laws has not benefited the good functioning of the education system. The *accord on education* that would be wished for has not been achieved. Despite this, the basic educational cycles established by 1990's *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* (Organic Organisation of the Education System Law, LOGSE) have been maintained: Early Years Education from 0 to 5 years, Primary Education from 6 to 11 years and Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) from 12 to 16.

Does the right to this compulsory education mean that Spain is a host country with high standards of social inclusion? *Accepting* foreign students involves recognising their right to education and to their beliefs and ways of life; it requires educational policies and practices that take into account the complexity of situations and the diversity of cultural identities. In turn, *inclusion* requires overcoming educational inequalities. In answer to the question of whether Spain is a host country with high standards of social inclusion, we believe it is not, as shown by the results of this study.

This article describes the educational inequalities between native and foreign students in compulsory education. We chose this problem for three fundamental reasons: 1) firstly, experts regard education and health as the two most reliable indicators of the development of societies and individuals (Piketty, 2021); 2) secondly, the education system is regarded as the most important agency for acquisition of competences for the socialisation of individuals and for their incorporation into the productive system of a particular society (Piketty, 2021); 3) and thirdly, early action in compulsory education (early years, primary and compulsory secondary) is fundamental for reducing social inequalities.

The classic research by the Nobel economics laureate Heckman (2006, 2008) offers three major conclusions: 1) investing in more disadvantaged children and adolescents is an uncommon public policy, but in the long term it promotes social justice and productivity in the economy and society; 2) there is over-investment in the higher levels of education and under-investment at early ages; 3) basic education has a higher rate of social return on the capital invested in it compared with the return on capital invested in higher education. These conclusions are not usually accepted by societies with neo-liberal economies or by many senior academics and designers of public education policies who continue to cling on to the myth of meritocracy.

In the case of Spain, a recent literature review of research into pre-university levels (Turienzo & Manso, 2022) found that educational inequalities also occur in compulsory education and are a clear example of a lack of social justice. Educational equality has been proclaimed a right, on the basis of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, but it has never been the case in practice. The fundamental problem is that there is a gulf between the official discourse on equality of opportunities promoted by education and the reality of the educational inequalities that underprivileged groups face. Why analyse inequalities between native and foreign students in compulsory education? In most cases, families of foreign origin face challenging sociodemographic situations. In addition to the circumstance of low economic status, there is their position as foreigners. Regarding school achievement, in a just society, this is not just a matter of all students duly attending school. It is necessary to consider how real the equality of opportunities actually is. The worst social segregation or social non-inclusion is that which is hidden behind poor academic results, skewed by cultural and socioeconomic background (Prieto, 2022). It is necessary to address, once and for all, the true problem faced by the foreign population in compulsory education: the mismatch between political declarations, set out in education acts, and the lack of financial resources and teacher training for the effective implementation of these laws.

The students' position as foreigners is no small matter. As the Nobel Economics laureates Banerjee and Duflo (2019) have argued, immigration is a question that is important enough to shape policy in general and educational policy in particular; and, above all, it produces a social climate of prejudices in broad sectors of the host population and among a significant number of teachers. There are many absurdities (or prejudices); among them, the idea that the educational levels of the foreign students are lower than those of the natives for promoting the learning of competences and for contributing to the economic development of the host country.

Regarding the question that concerns us, we believe the following are immediate precursors to the present work: 1) the results of the report from the project undertaken by the European Commission (2011) *Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU (RESL.eu)*, presented by Szalai (2013–2018); 2) the report by Carrasco, Pamiés and Narciso (2018) on the educational gap of students in compulsory education owing to their foreign origin, which is based on the data from the empirical research in Catalonia of the above-mentioned EU project; 3) the PISA 2018 report (OECD, 2019a & b) with regards to the educational inequalities of foreign students in Spanish compulsory education; 4) the report by Prieto-Mendoza (2022) on the integration of students of immigrant origin (realities, results and shortcomings of the Spanish education system); 5) the report by Mahía-Casado and Medina-Moral (2022) on the integration of foreign students in compulsory education in the Spanish education system; 6) the report by Carabaña (2023) on the impact of social segregation between centres

and its implications for the educational inequalities of foreign students; and 7) the most recent data published by Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE, 2023a & b), Eurostat (2023) and the Spanish government's Ministry of Education and Professional Training. These reports were all published in the last five years.

Why do we critique the results relating to educational inequalities of foreign students from the perspective of theory of care? Because in the best cases the dominant models of school learning and assessment follow approaches from liberal thought and in the majority follow neo-liberal approaches with an economic outlook, which are insufficient for understanding the root of educational inequalities and inadequate for evaluating them.

Nonetheless, the current theory of care offers two promising lines for education: ethics and policy. Ethics of care have acquired considerable profile with the current emergence of applied ethics. It is an ethics of cases in which each individual or social group has its own specific needs, and they demand the duty to facilitate the opportunities to satisfy them. The ethics of care transcend and complement the ethics of justice (Pau, 2020). The ethics of justice are based on treating all individuals the same, while the ethics of care propose the opposite: unequal treatment for different people. This is because they start from two different ethical principles: the former is a universal, objective and abstract principle as it is enunciated in regards to all individuals in general, while the latter is a particular, subjective and concrete principle that refers to each human being or social group in its specific needs. There is no reason to set the ethics of care and the ethics of justice against each other: care must be taken into consideration if we are to achieve justice. Care is a more basic value than justice in that it obliges the policies of justice to be applied in a different way, thus making them more just.

As foreign students have very special circumstances and needs, the ethics of care focus on these circumstances and needs and call on the people responsible for educational policies and teachers and families to achieve social inclusion:

Schools increasingly fail to fulfil the role of facilitating social mobility that is assigned to them because they do not offset the most disadvantaged students' economic and cultural deficiencies. All of the studies carried out in this regard agree in concluding that school failure above all harms immigrant students and, in general, students from disadvantaged sectors (Camps, 2021, p. 60).

The diversity of the needs of foreign students owing to their culture of origin, the difficulties that often result from late entry to a school curriculum that is different to the one they studied in their country of origin, lack of knowledge, in some cases, of the vehicular language in which the curriculum is delivered in Spain as a whole or in its autonomous communities, and other circumstances such as the social settings between the school and the family in which the students interact, requires careful attention to their particular features and differences, both cultural

and personal. Therefore, the educational models of liberal politics based on the theory of justice should be reconsidered and complemented with other alternative educational models (Mínguez & Linares, 2022) and neo-liberal approaches should be rejected.

The complexity of the situations that affect foreign students makes them especially vulnerable. And solutions to the problems of vulnerable people also have to be political: “It is a mistake to maintain that justice alone is part of the public sphere while care remains in the private sphere. Care is a universal duty; it should be accessible to anyone who justly requests it” (Camps, 2021, p. 76, own translation). Meeting the needs of the most vulnerable cannot be left solely to the mercy of sensitive individuals. Efforts by political leaders and leaders of civil society are also needed. The necessary response to these problems is an essential imperative that should involve everyone: from ordinary citizen to social organisations of all types, from public bodies to governments and international institutions. Care should be regarded as a normative ethical principle that should govern all human actions, both individual and organisational.

2. OBJECTIVES

Our first objective is to identify the educational inequalities between native and foreign students in Spanish compulsory education, relating to the acquisition of cognitive competences, repetition of years and early school leaving, according to the most recent national and international reports. These educational inequalities lead to social exclusion.

The second objective is to provide a critique from theory of care of the insufficiency of the means for school learning for foreign students and the instruments for assessing it. This theory is proposed as one that differs from and complements the theory of justice of liberalism and is in opposition to the educational concept of economic neo-liberalism which currently dominates conceptions of school learning and its evaluation. From theory of care, political, ethical and pedagogical guidelines for compulsory education are proposed for the social inclusion of the foreign population.

3. METHODOLOGY

This work describes educational inequalities between foreign and native students in compulsory education in Spain. The question focusses on Spain. To provide this description, we carry out a systematic review of academic articles from official primary sources and secondary sources. These reports are the precursors to this article. The data come from official sources such as Spain’s National Statistics Institute, its Ministry for Education and Professional Training, its Active Population Survey,

Eurostat and the PISA reports. We have also taken into account reports prepared by specialists (secondary sources) based on these data. These all meet the following criteria: 1) they relate to aspects of educational inequality in Spanish compulsory education or in another EU state; 2) they were published in the last 5 years; and 3) their methodology is empirical or they are reviews. The results described refer to the whole of Spain and are not disaggregated by autonomous community or by gender.

In order to carry out the systematic review correctly, we followed the PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021). We started the search on 20 January 2023, we performed the screening and selection process in February and we carried out the data analysis in March. We used the *WoS* and *Scopus* databases with the following search formulas and terms: Migrants* AND Outcomes* AND Spain* OR Migrants* AND Early school leaving * AND Spain*. We found that including other search terms such as “Foreigners”, “Inequalities” or “Academic results” did not increase the number of articles in the results.

We filtered by age of the sample and language (English and Spanish). The articles were recorded in Microsoft Excel®, eliminating duplicate articles and selecting ones that were of interest according to the criteria set out in Tables 1 and 2. The selection criteria correspond to the proposed objectives which the study attempts to answer. Figure 1 shows the process followed to select the articles included in this review. Of the 14 articles selected, 5 were identified in *Scopus* and 9 in *WoS*.

TABLE 1
 INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Type of article	Empirical or theoretical works based on official primary sources and national or international reports.	Theoretical or review works that do not include evaluation of educational inequalities between migrants and the local population.
Publication	≤ 5 years.	> 5 years.
Sample	Sample size ≥ 150.	Sample size < 150.
	Includes subgroups of migrants.	Does not include subgroups of migrants.
	Includes aspects relating to educational inequalities in compulsory education.	Does not refer to educational inequalities in compulsory education.
	Reports from Spain or elsewhere in Europe.	Reports from outside Europe.
Language	English or Spanish.	Other languages.

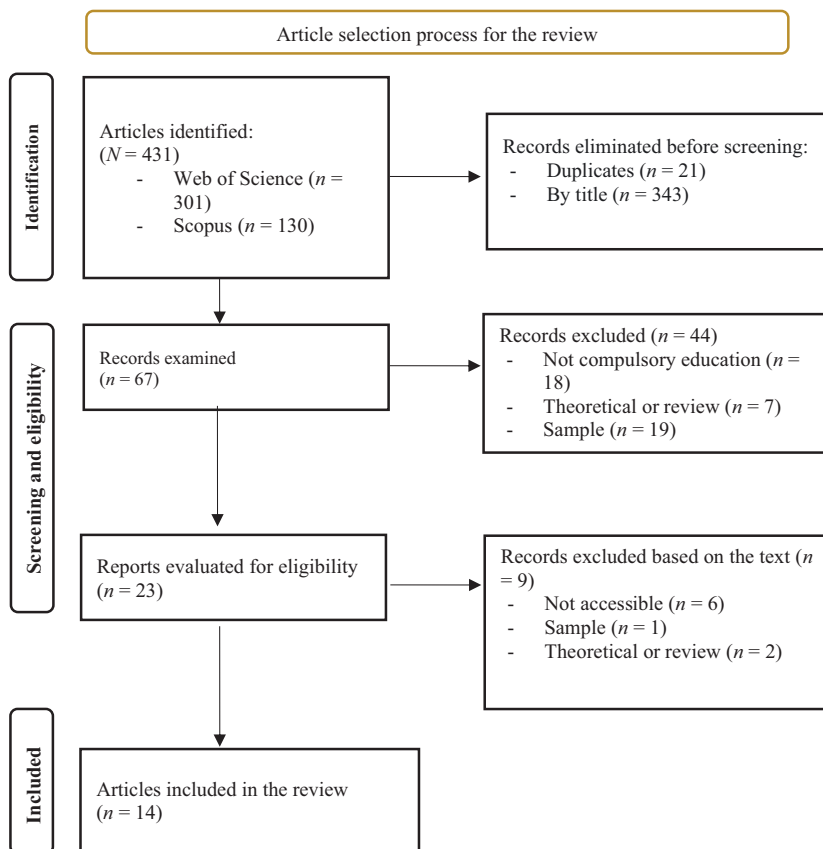
Source: prepared by authors

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Study	Results
Ferrara (2022)	Disadvantages in higher secondary education and ethnic status.
Labussière <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Children classed as foreign and educational opportunities.
Cucalón-Tirado & Olmo-Pintado (2019)	Teachers' dilemmas and tensions when teaching foreign students.
Gries <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Challenges and barriers in educational achievements comparing native and immigrant students.
Grana (2021)	[Family and institutional narratives regarding barriers to accessing school for foreign students and their families.
Cebolla-Boado <i>et al.</i> (2019)	The role of education in explaining the differences before the risk of unemployment in the migrant and native population: Inequalities in academic results and educational progression between levels of foreign students compared with native ones.
Onses-Segarra & Estalayo-Bielsa (2021)	The need to improve integration policies for foreign children to avoid social exclusion.
Domingo & Bayona i Carrasco (2021)	Differences in students are highly visible in groups whose access to nationality is easier: In a context of unequal territorial distribution of these groups in the city, different impacts are introduced by neighbourhood.
Volante <i>et al.</i> (2019)	A useful starting point to formulate educational policies that confront the challenge of improving academic results of immigrant student populations within their country.
Essomba-Gelabert <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Proposals for intercultural politics.
Ambrosetti <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Well-being in school is much more important for the achievements of immigrant students compared with their native classmates, especially in the first cycle of secondary education.
Intxausti-Intxausti <i>et al.</i> (2022)	The gap in academic results between foreign and native students when there is a high level of immigrants in the school.
Francia <i>et al.</i> (2021)	The need to pay attention to the integration of the CDN in the enactment of the Agenda 2030 goals to avoid a simplistic and limited analysis of sustainability.
Koehler & Schneider (2019)	Introduction to the context: refugees in the education systems of EU member states.

Source: prepared by authors

FIGURE 1
 FLOW CHART BASED ON PRISMA 2020 GUIDELINES



Source: Prepared by authors based on the databases consulted

We were surprised to find in the review that educational policies do not directly address the practice of care as a solution to the educational inequalities facing foreign students. Most of the works we found address questions that can be classified in 3 categories of analysis: 1) care in the education system, especially in relation to teacher training; 2) society, care and social justice; and 3) care as a universal value. This literature review has also shown the importance that various authors place on care for education: the ethics of care are one of the principal foundations for the articulation of contemporary pedagogy given that their values are essential for the creation of a more just and sustainable society (Vázquez, 2010).

Therefore, in order to consider the results, we will start from the classical authors in the field of theory of care (Gilligan, 1982, Tronto, 2013, 2017 & Brugère, 2021) using the hermeneutic methodology, which is especially suited to analysis of people's vulnerabilities and how they relate to others (Domingo-Moratalla, 2022). This methodology is required by the theoretical perspective of care, initiated by Gilligan (1982), and by the conditions for practising care proposed by Brugère (2021), which have not been sufficiently explored in current research into the direction of educational policies and practices.

4. RESULTS

Educational inequalities between native and foreign students in compulsory education manifest themselves in three indicators: acquisition of cognitive competences (mathematics, science and reading), repeating years and early school leaving. This section principally refers to these inequalities. However, two issues should be addressed first given the controversies they generate in broad sections of Spain's population and among groups of teachers. Data are also provided regarding these issues. They are: 1) the increase in the foreign population in Spain in recent years; and 2) foreigners currently enrolled in compulsory education and their distribution by stages and by whether schools are publicly or privately owned.

With regards to the first issue, the increase in foreign population, Spain was historically a country of emigrants until the late-20th century. This historical situation has changed in the 21st century and Spain is now a country that receives foreigners. Between 2001 and 2008, there was an increase in the foreign population; this was followed by a decrease until 2015 owing to the 2008 financial crisis. The flow of migrants in each of the last 7 years (2016–2022) has been positive: more foreigners arrived than left (Instituto Nacional de Estadística de España, 2023). In absolute terms, the foreign population in Spain has increased in the last 7 years from 4 418 898 in 2016 (9.32 % of the total population) to 5 407 491 in 2022 (11.64 %).

With regards to the second problem, the progress of foreign students enrolled in mainstream education and in non-university special education from the 2001–2002 academic year up to the 2020–2021 academic year, the fluctuations we have identified in the foreign population in general have also occurred: growth in enrolment until the 2008–2009 academic year, a decrease until the 2015–16 academic year and a return to growth from that year to the present time (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022). In the teaching systems mentioned above, which include, as well as compulsory education, the Baccalaureate, level 1 and 2 professional training and special education, the maximum percentage of foreign students enrolled has not exceeded 9.9 % of the non-university students (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021).

Table 3 shows the details of compulsory education and its distribution by stages and by publicly and/or privately owned schools:

TABLE 3
 PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS BY MAINSTREAM
 COMPULSORY EDUCATION 2020–2021 ACADEMIC YEAR

	TOTAL foreigners (absolute figures)	State Schools		Private Schools	
		Absolute	%	Absolute	%
Mainstream Compulsory Ed.	693 079	545 541	78.71 %	147 538	21.28 %
Early-Years Ed.	160 188	125 806	78.54 %	34 382	21.46 %
Primary Ed.	337 050	271 494	80.55 %	65 556	19.45 %
Special Ed.	5 135	3 657	71.22 %	1 478	28.78 %
Compulsory Secondary Ed.	190 706	144 584	75.82 %	46 122	24.18 %

Source: prepared by authors

Regarding the central problem of this article, educational inequalities between native and foreign students, we consider three indicators of school achievement on completion of compulsory education: a) acquisition of mathematics, science and reading competences (PISA-2018 in OECD, 2019a & b); b) students repeating years in primary and compulsory secondary education (PISA-2018 in OECD, 2019a & b); and c) early school leaving (Eurostat, 2023).

With regards to the acquisition of cognitive competences, in compulsory education in the Spanish education system, foreign students score: 1) 40 points less in mathematics competences than native students; 2) 34 points less in scientific competences; and 3) 32 points less in reading competences. These differences are significant. Most of the authors who prepare their reports on the basis of these data believe that the gap is essentially caused by the socio-demographic conditions that affect foreign families: parents' level of studies, type of employment and accumulated wealth (ESCS, index of economic, cultural and social status) (OECD, 2019a).

Lower school achievement in cognitive competences has an immediate impact on the rate of students repeating a year. So, according to the PISA-18 data, the rate of repetition for 15-year-old native students is 22 %, while for foreign students it is 50 % (Mahía-Casado & Medina-Moral, 2022, p. 63). A significant number of teachers in Spain believe that repeating a year can give students with difficulties more time

to *catch up* with their classmates academically. Spain holds one of the top spots in students repeating a year.

The early school leaving rate is defined as the percentage of the population aged between 18 and 24 that has not completed the Baccalaureate and is not in any other type of training. Early school leaving is higher among foreign young people in all of the member states of the European Union. Spain also has the unfortunate distinction of occupying the top spot in this indicator of inequality: for each native student who leaves school early, more than two foreign students do so (Carrasco *et al.*, 2018; Mahía-Casado & Medina-Moral, 2022, p. 64). Although this situation has improved in recent years, the problem has persisted in the figures from the last 7 years (Table 4).

TABLE 4
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE POPULATION AGED
FROM 18 TO 24 BY ORIGIN AND YEAR

Both sexes							
	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
TOTAL							
Total (%)	13.3	16.0	17.3	17.9	18.3	19.0	20.0
Spanish (%)	11.4	13.6	14.7	15.3	15.9	16.4	17.8
Foreign (%)	26.5	32.5	35.1	35.1	35.8	37.6	36.9
With ESO title							
Total (%)	7.7	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.8	10.7	10.8
Spanish (%)	6.8	8.5	9.5	9.6	9.6	9.6	10.0
Foreign (%)	14.1	20.0	19.8	20.0	19.7	18.9	16.8
Without ESO title							
Total (%)	5.6	6.1	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.3	9.1
Spanish (%)	4.7	5.1	5.1	5.8	6.3	6.9	7.7
Foreign (%)	12.4	12.5	15.8	15.1	16.1	18.6	20.2

Source: Educabase (2023). Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, based on the active population survey. Percentage calculated using the method established by Eurostat. ESO = Compulsory Secondary Education

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In this section, we adopt two perspectives to discuss the results: 1) comparing the results with other similar research from recent years; and 2) a critique from

theory of care of the neo-liberal approaches that underpin students' learning and evaluation processes.

With regards to the increase in foreign population, has there been an avalanche of immigrants towards rich countries? This problem has been called *the mouth of the shark* (Banerje & Duflo, 2019) because of the panic and the political repercussion it has caused in many countries in the European Union and in the United States. According to the *World Migration Report 2020*, the proportion of international migrants in relation to the global population is almost the same as in the years 1960 or 1990 or 2017: 3.5 % (UN - IOM, 2019). According to this report, Europe, our geopolitical setting, hosted some 82 million international migrants in 2019, 18 % of its total population. Despite this international migration, the population fell in 2019 and 2020 by 0.4 % and 0.6 % respectively (Eurostat 2023). This can hardly be regarded as an avalanche, although the war in Ukraine might affect the previous figures.

In the case of Spain, the data reveal three phenomena: 1) until recently, the Spanish were citizens of a country of emigrants and we should remember this historical situation; 2) there is no avalanche of foreigners threatening our jobs or the existence of the Spanish state; furthermore, the proportion of foreigners in Spain is lower than the European Union mean of 18 %; 3) we belong to a multicultural country with a mix of cultures, both for the path of our own history and for the new reality of migrations.

What do the data say about the rate of enrolment of foreign students in compulsory education? 1) there is no avalanche in the rate of enrolment in the total population, although compulsory education is the level with the most foreign students; 2) the highest percentage is concentrated in primary education; 3) there is a notable fall in students in Compulsory Secondary Education compared to primary; this can probably be attributed to early school leaving; 4) less than 25 % of the students are enrolled in private schools, whether state-assisted or not; 5) the previous fact reflects segregation of foreign students by type of school. For Carabaña (2023), this situation simply does not represent a problem that generates educational and social inequalities; for other researchers, with whom we agree, it is a clear exemplar of such inequalities (Lubián-Grana, 2021).

Regarding inequalities in *cognitive competences*, there is agreement among researchers on the significance of the socio-demographic conditions that affect foreign families (ESCS). Nonetheless, they focus on different aspects when analysing the position of foreigners in greater depth. For example, Essomba-Gelabert *et al.* (2019) suggest focussing on specific factors that help to overcome inequalities: learning the language, community education, training teachers to develop an intercultural focus and family participation. They also propose considering the recommendations by experts from 2018 in the framework of the European SIRIUS network regarding new policy guidelines aimed at the integration of foreign children and adolescents with a holistic student-centred focus (Onses-Segarra & Estalayo-Bielsa, 2021).

In educational policies aimed at integrating the foreign population, the results reveal a lack of coordination between the government and educational institutions and, above all, a lack of collaboration by the people responsible for educational policies with other sections of the government responsible for economic, health, employment and immigration policies. Without this holistic overview of the problem of integration, the value of the current large-scale data sets is very limited for research and political analysis (Volante *et al.*, 2019).

The results of other pieces of research relate to the climate of reception of the teachers and by the centres, listening to the aspirations of the families and of the students. It has been established (Carrasco *et al.*, 2018) that despite the different forms of support received by their families, foreign students' aspirations are often ignored or overlooked in the educational responses offered by sectors of teachers and the management teams of a large number of centres.

As for teachers, as the educational resources available are not adequate or sufficient to meet the specific needs of these students, they use arguments and strategies to direct their students towards educational itineraries that are in conflict with the students' higher expectations of their own performance (Cucalon-Tirado & Olmo-Pintado, 2019). Regarding the centres, according to family accounts and statements by management teams, there are institutional barriers relating to them being migrants when choosing a centre for their children owing to access regulations that penalise these families to a greater extent. In some centres, the institutional barriers are a consequence of unacceptable discriminatory practices (Grana, 2021).

Foreign ESO students' perceptions of teachers' expectations of their possibilities of school achievement is poor and always below the expectations they attribute to their parents (PISA-2018, in OECD, 2019a & b). This influences their self-concept, academic regulation and completion, sense of belonging in the school and confidence in their education. Students' subjective well-being in the centre correlates positively with school achievement (Ambrosetti *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding foreign students who repeat a year, research has for some time shown that repeating a year has negative effects on subsequent academic performance and on attitudes towards the educational centre. The mean difference in reading performance between students who repeat a year and those who do not is 98 points for OECD countries. In the EU as a whole it is slightly lower at 93 points in favour of those who do not repeat. The difference between the two groups in Spain is 97 points. Analysis of the PISA-2018 figures shows that repeating a year does not help improve students' reading, mathematics or science performance. Reducing the rate of people repeating a year in compulsory education is something that the Spanish education system still needs to address.

Early school leaving has substantial costs, both from the point of view of the young people who leave and for society as a whole. This is indicated by projections

regarding employability, participation in the job market, job stability, salaries and productivity (Cebolla-Boado *et al.*, 2019). Early school leaving is another important indicator of the educational gap in compulsory education that results in social exclusion (Mahía-Casado & Medina-Moral, 2022). Although this situation has improved in recent years, the problem has persisted in figures from the last 7 years.

Therefore, the second part of the discussion of the results is a critique from the theory of care of liberal and neo-liberal approaches to students' learning and their evaluation. This second perspective is backed by the literature review of research over a period of 10 years (2010–2020) on ethics of care and education (Babarro *et al.*, 2023). We reviewed 1189 works in *ERIC*, *WoS* and *DIALNET* and from this analysis of the articles that passed through all of the selection filters we identified six principal topics: care and social justice; care and education; teacher identity; care and gender; teacher training; and cultural diversity and education. This review found that care is a central pillar of current pedagogy.

As Brugère (2021) argues, ethics of care reject the collective accounts that impersonally encompass all individuals. The assertion of individual liberties and personal autonomy should be analysed again from an interdependent world, with varying forms of vulnerability and injustice to which they relate. Moreover, it is necessary to turn our gaze to ordinary life, to embodied and relational subjects (Gozálvez & Jover, 2016). If the theory of care can propose educational policies and practices that complement those of liberalism and provide an alternative to those of neo-liberalism, it is because it puts us on guard against the commercialistic and bureaucratic tendencies of our societies, proposing the need to take into account the specific *others*, putting into effect more just social policies (Jackson, 2014). Looking out for others means carefully considering vulnerable people, giving them the means to share in wealth, resources and decision-making powers, in order to establish a shared world in which people are not excluded because of their gender, wealth or because they are immigrants.

From this perspective, we criticise the majority of the approaches of the learning processes, that are normally the same for native and foreign students and do not take into account their personal traits, their cultural conditioning and the circumstances of each individual's entrance into the Spanish education system. In particular, we criticise the standardisation of international processes for assessing student competences, which do not take into account personal characteristics and students' position as foreigners; a standardisation that has acquired socio-academic approval and prestige. The persistence of inequalities reveals the failure of the practical applications of neo-liberal education policies. Different policies are needed, that address the individual, family and cultural characteristics of foreign students and connect the education system to other important fields within governments, such as the economy, health, employment and social care (Volante *et al.*, 2019).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In relation to the first objective, identifying educational inequalities, the principal conclusions are as follows:

1. Research agrees that educational inequalities exist between foreign and native students in compulsory education regarding the acquisition of cognitive competences (mathematics, science and reading), repeating years and early school leaving. These inequalities are significant. This is backed by the international reports relating to Spain and data provided by Spain's Ministry of Education and Professional Training, its National Statistics Institute and Eurostat. There is also agreement that the most influential factor in these inequalities is the index of economic, cultural and social status (ESCS) of the families, whether native or foreign.
2. There is no agreement on whether students being foreign is a significant factor for educational inequalities. Some research – a minority – sees students being foreign as a matter of little importance in the organisation of the schools and in these students' lower presence at more prestigious schools and their absence from the curriculum pathways that lead to higher studies. Most research argues that being foreign is important in educational inequalities and the social exclusion of the students.
3. Research that considers being foreign to be important insists on the lack of realistic policies that take into account the particular needs of the foreign population. In particular, these works identify: 1) a lack of attention to diversity owing to cultural background; and 2) a disconnection between educational policies and the other government policies regarding the economy, health, employment, immigration and social care. For an inclusive education, it is necessary to design policies that consider individuals and their surroundings.
4. In particular, they emphasise the need for specific and adapted programmes for language learning, community education and family participation. They insist on the need to listen to families and students in their preferences and expectations both for access to centres and for curriculum pathways.
5. The importance placed on teacher training is a separate matter: for the hosting of students to be sensitive to their needs, to respect their school expectations, provide accompaniment in the transition between school stages and in training for an intercultural focus in teaching.

In relation to the second objective, the critique of the dominant approaches in learning processes and evaluating them from theory of care, the conclusions are:

1. The ethics of care reject the approaches of learning processes that are the same for all individuals. Learning processes must be adapted to the needs and circumstances of each individual and/or social group.

2. *Care* is an ethical and political theory that proposes fairer educational practices than those espoused by liberalism, which it complements, and alternative educational practices to those of neo-liberalism, which it repudiates. Care for foreign students requires careful attention to their vulnerability, giving them the means for real equality of opportunities.
3. This perspective criticises the majority of the approaches to the learning process, which are normally the same for all students, native and/or foreign. Above all, it criticises the legitimacy of the results of the international performance assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA reports) or the PIRLS-2021 report (2023) on the reading comprehension of children in year 4 of primary school in the Spanish education system compared with students from other OECD and EU countries. The report in question did not even consider being foreign as a factor. A change of direction is needed if we are to solve the serious problem of educational inequalities and social exclusion of foreign students. The theory of care, in its ethical and political aspects, could provide this new direction as it foresees educational alternatives that would have to be explored.

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