

INEQUALITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Education represents, in theory, one of the main instruments of social mobility and the construction of more equitable societies. However, in practice, structural inequalities persist within and outside education systems, reflecting and reproducing social, economic, cultural, and territorial gaps. This chapter analyzes the multiple dimensions of educational inequality, with special attention to income, gender, and ethnicity gaps; intergenerational and social mobility linked to access to education; policies and instruments aimed at promoting educational equity; and affirmative actions that seek to compensate for historical conditions of disadvantage.

Various studies have pointed out that educational inequality is not an isolated phenomenon of the economic environment but is both a consequence and a determinant of the dynamics of social exclusion (Espinoza, 2016). Therefore, understanding the factors that affect inequalities and the policies designed to mitigate them is crucial for researchers, policymakers, and social actors committed to the right to education.

EDUCATIONAL GAPS BY INCOME, GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Educational gaps are visible manifestations of the structural inequalities that affect millions of children and young people in Latin America and the world. These gaps are manifested at different levels: access, permanence, quality, learning achievements, and educational trajectories. Next, three of the most significant dimensions are analyzed: socioeconomic, gender and ethnic origin gaps.

Numerous studies have shown that the socioeconomic level of the household is one of the main determinants of educational performance, access

to higher levels of schooling and the probability of dropping out of school. In Latin America, socioeconomic inequality directly affects educational opportunities from early childhood, generating a vicious circle of intergenerational reproduction of poverty (UNESCO, 2021).

According to data from the World Bank (2022), students in the highest income quintile in Latin American countries are three times more likely to complete secondary education than those in the lowest quintile. This gap is further aggravated in the transition to higher education. In addition, studies by the Laboratory for Research and Evaluation of Educational Policies (2020) have identified that private spending on education (including tuition, tutoring, and materials) has a cumulative effect that reinforces inequalities in academic performance.

The ECLAC report (2020) warns that the conditions of the family environment (such as cultural capital, housing conditions, access to technologies, and economic stability) affect school performance even before children enter the education system. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these inequalities, leaving millions of students out of remote education without connectivity or adult support at home (OECD, 2021).

Although significant progress has been made in parity of access to basic education between men and women in many countries, gender gaps persist in a more subtle but structural way. In several contexts, girls face greater barriers to school permanence, especially in rural and indigenous communities, while boys tend to have higher rates of lagging behind or dropping out in secondary and upper secondary education (UNESCO, 2019).

In countries such as Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia, adolescent girls in rural areas are up to 20% less likely to complete secondary education than their urban peers (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020). These gaps are closely linked to cultural norms, gender roles, teenage pregnancies, unpaid domestic work, and school violence, which hinders the continuity of female educational trajectories.

On the other hand, at the higher level, there is a feminization of enrollment in many disciplines, but also a persistent horizontal segregation: women are concentrated in careers related to health, education or humanities,

while men predominate in engineering, technology and applied sciences. This division subsequently affects job opportunities, and the gender pay gap (INEE, 2018).

Ethnicity is another key driver of educational inequality, particularly in regions with significant indigenous or Afro-descendant populations. In many Latin American countries, indigenous communities face cumulative disadvantages that translate into less access to educational services, lower quality of learning, and higher dropout rates (ECLAC & UNICEF, 2021).

Studies by Schmelkes (2010) and López (2015) have shown that the educational exclusion of indigenous peoples responds not only to economic factors, but also to processes of structural discrimination, inappropriate curricula, and language barriers. The absence of teachers trained in interculturality, as well as educational materials in indigenous languages, perpetuates an educational experience alien to the cultural realities of these groups.

A paradigmatic case is that of Guatemala, where indigenous students have illiteracy rates three times higher than those of non-indigenous students and face a system that has historically made their knowledge, practices, and languages invisible (UNICEF, 2020). The recognition of cultural diversity as the axis of educational policy remains a pending debt in much of Latin America.

INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY

Intergenerational educational mobility refers to the possibility for children to achieve higher educational levels than their parents. This concept is fundamental to evaluate the degree of structural equity of an education system and its effectiveness as a mechanism for the redistribution of social opportunities. In contexts where this mobility is low, socioeconomic origin tends to rigidly determine school trajectories, which generates an almost automatic reproduction of inequalities between generations (Torche, 2014).

In recent decades, the analysis of intergenerational educational mobility has gained increasing relevance in the study of inequality in Latin America. The region faces a triple paradox: 1) High levels of economic inequality, 2)

Low upward social mobility, and 3) Education systems with limited compensatory capacity (Solís, 2020). This means that the school, instead of functioning as a lever for social ascent, often operates as a selection mechanism that reproduces pre-existing hierarchies, filtering students according to their social origin.

Longitudinal studies, such as those developed by the World Bank (2018), show that the educational level of parents is a powerful predictor of the educational level achieved by their children. For example, in Mexico, only 14% of young people whose parents did not complete primary school manage to enter university, while more than 60% of those who come from households with high educational capital access this level (SEDESOL, 2017).

This pattern is also observed in other countries in the region, such as Brazil, Peru, and Colombia, where levels of educational attainment are strongly correlated with family origin, even when controlling for other variables, such as income or urban or rural residence.

Intergenerational educational inequalities are not only due to poverty or lack of material resources. There are symbolic and cultural factors that shape school decisions and student trajectories. Unequal access to information networks, lack of familiarity with school codes, symbolic self-exclusion, and limited educational aspirations play a central role.

According to Bourdieu (1977), these forms of inequality operate through cultural capital and class habitus, that is, learned dispositions that lead individuals to act according to what "corresponds to them" according to their origin. Thus, disadvantages are naturalized as individual failures, while advantages are interpreted as personal merits.

The segmentation of the education system reinforces these gaps. In countries such as Chile, Colombia, and Peru, school systems are strongly stratified by the ability to pay, which generates parallel trajectories. While students from upper sectors have access to private schools with high academic standards, those from low-income sectors attend public schools with precarious infrastructure, limited resources, and high teacher turnover (OECD, 2022). This dualization of the education system profoundly affects intergenerational mobility. The quality of the school environment, to-

gether with the cultural capital of the home, acts as a filter that blocks opportunities for advancement for those who come from vulnerable sectors. Countries that have achieved high levels of intergenerational educational mobility share certain structural traits:

- ⇒ High-quality and free public education,
- ⇒ Significant investment in early childhood,
- ⇒ Integrative curricula,
- ⇒ Sustained compensatory policies, and
- ⇒ Unified school systems that avoid segregation by class or ethnicity.

Cases such as those of Finland, Canada, and South Korea demonstrate that an educational policy focused on equity can reduce the weight of family origin in school results (Espinoza & Muñoz, 2019). In these countries, universal access to quality education services from the earliest years of life has been key to expanding opportunities and reducing the legacy of inequalities (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of the probability of accessing higher education according to the educational level of the parents.

Country	Access to higher education (%) – Parents without secondary school
Mexico	14%
Brazil	18%
Colombia	21%
Peru	19%
Chile	25%
South Korea	48%
Canada	53%
Finland	60%

**Adapted from the World Bank (2018), the OECD (2022), Espinoza & Muñoz (2019).*

In short, educational intergenerational mobility is a sensitive indicator of the structural limitations of school systems to fulfill their egalitarian promise. In contexts in which educational trajectories are determined by family origin, education ceases to be an instrument of social transformation to become a mechanism for perpetuating inequality. Breaking this cycle requires a profound reform that decommodifies education, democratizes access to learning opportunities, and reconstructs the role of the State as a guarantor of educational rights at all stages of the life cycle.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

Social mobility is not the result of a single policy or an isolated intervention. It is built (or blocked) by a complex chain of interdependent conditions that must be articulated and strengthened over time. This chain, which begins in the first years of life and extends throughout the life cycle, integrates structural, institutional and symbolic factors.

The foundation of any sustainable educational trajectory is built before entry into the formal school system. Children who face malnutrition, poor health conditions or lack of cognitive stimulation have persistent disadvantages. Studies by Heckman (2006) show that cognitive and non-cognitive gaps originating in early childhood tend to widen over time if they are not corrected in time.

Early schooling is not enough if it is not accompanied by effective educational quality. This implies not only infrastructure and materials, but also teacher training, relevant curricula, family accompaniment and a school environment free of violence. A weak link here (such as high teacher turnover or segregation by socioeconomic level) produces cumulative effects that impair school performance in later stages.

Moments of transition, especially between basic, upper secondary and higher education, are critical points in which inequalities deepen. Dropout rates in these sections are usually higher among low-income students, women, indigenous peoples, and people from rural areas. This is due to a combination of factors:

- ⇒ Economic restrictions,
- ⇒ Lack of vocational guidance,
- ⇒ Lack of institutional knowledge (limited cultural capital),
- ⇒ Inequitable educational provision (such as low coverage of high schools in rural areas).

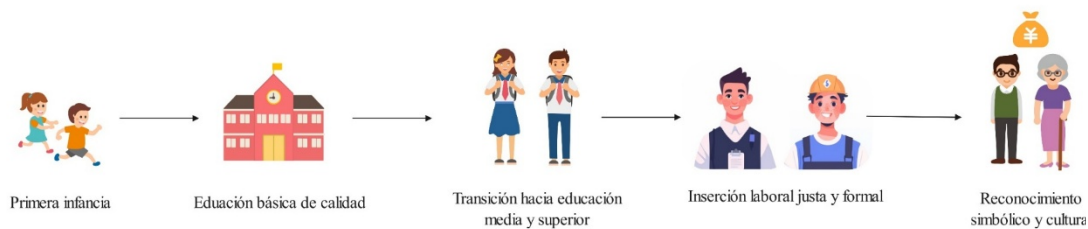
The educational impact on social mobility also depends on the opportunity structures of the labor market. In contexts where informality, underemployment or structural discrimination (by gender, race or class) predominate, education loses the ability to translate into real improvements in quality of life. For example, indigenous or Afro-Mexican youth with university degrees face higher rates of unemployment or underemployment

than their mestizo peers, indicating a structural barrier to recognition of their credentials.

Finally, educational mobility is also mediated by symbolic factors: the perception of merit, the legitimacy of achievements, and the social recognition of trajectories. Institutional discrimination and structural racism limit the ability of certain groups to capitalize on their education in terms of prestige, access, and status. Bourdieu (1999) points out that educational capital does not have value, but to the extent that it is recognized as legitimate in the social field. Figure 1 then summarizes these interrelated conditions, each link representing a stage or dimension that can strengthen or fracture social mobility.

Figure 1

Chain of conditions of educational social mobility.



If a link is weak, opportunities are blocked, educational investment does not translate into mobility and structural inequality is reproduced. This systemic approach forces us to rethink educational policies beyond the classroom. Social mobility is a function of individual effort or access to formal education and the result of a structural network of conditions that must be aligned to generate a sustainable upward trajectory. If any of these links (initial education, teacher quality, equality of transitions, labor market or symbolic recognition) is weakened, the chain loses strength and, with it, the transformative potential of education is eroded.

Therefore, promoting educational mobility requires comprehensive, inter-sectoral and culturally sensitive strategies that combine sustained public investment, equity policies and institutional support mechanisms that recognize the diversity of trajectories and starting points.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY MEASURES

Educational equity is a normative and operational principle that seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their social, economic, ethnic, territorial, or gender background, have access to meaningful and relevant learning opportunities. Unlike equality (understood as the identical treatment for all), equity recognizes structural differences and inequalities to design differentiated responses aimed at fair results. In this sense, educational equity measures are strategies, policies and technical instruments aimed at correcting or compensating for inequalities of origin that affect access, permanence and educational achievement.

Equity measures can be classified according to their nature, scope and time of intervention. Table 2 presents a general typology that allows us to distinguish its dimensions.

Table 2

Typologies of educational equity measures.

Dimension	Type of measurement	Common Examples
Cost-effective	Cash transfers, scholarships, subsidies.	Benito Juárez Scholarship (Mexico), Bolsa Família (Brazil).
Pedagogical	Tutorials, differentiated attention, inclusive curricula.	Acceleration programs, focused mentoring.
Territorial	Affirmative action in marginalized areas.	Full-time schools in rural areas.
Cultural and symbolic	Intercultural education, native language.	Indigenous schools, bilingual materials.
Institutional	Structural reforms, design of regulatory frameworks.	Free laws, progressive financing.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on ECLAC (2021) and UNESCO-IIEP (2020).

Each of these measures responds to different failures of the educational system: economic, institutional, pedagogical or symbolic. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on their technical design, but also on their political viability and financial sustainability. There are at least three main approaches from which educational equity measures have been articulated:

- ⇒ Compensatory approach: it starts from the recognition of the initial disadvantages of certain groups and seeks to equalize the starting point. Example: scholarships for indigenous students or rural women.
- ⇒ Redistributive approach: modifies the allocation of resources according to the needs of the students. Here, the expense is not

the same for all students, but greater for those who face greater obstacles.

- ⇒ Universalist approach with progressive targeting proposes broad coverage, but with greater intensity for those who need it most, thus avoiding stigmatization. This model is characteristic of the Nordic countries.

The distribution of education funding is one of the most powerful elements for promoting equity. Evidence shows that in many Latin American countries, public spending per student tends to benefit middle- and high-income sectors the most, due to their concentration in urban areas or higher levels of education.

The application of equitable financing formulas, such as those based on "special educational needs" or "territorial vulnerability indices", makes it possible to redirect resources towards the most disadvantaged schools and communities (see table 3).

Table 3

Comparison of equitable financing models in Latin America.

Country	Equity mechanism in financing	Reported impact
Chile	Preferential School Grant (SEP).	Improvement of the results of vulnerable students (MINEDUC).
Colombia	General System of Participations with regional criteria.	Greater coverage in rural areas (DNP).
Mexico	Contribution Fund for Basic Education (FAEB).	It still has significant state inequities.
Uruguay	Allocation based on a formula of social indicators.	Increased school retention in disadvantaged areas.

Note: Information obtained from the IDB (2021), the World Bank (2018).

Various studies agree that focused pedagogical interventions (such as tutoring programs, accelerated learning, or socio-emotional accompaniment) have positive effects when applied to students at risk of falling behind. These measures, however, require accurate diagnoses, teacher training, and rigorous evaluation frameworks.

A successful example is the "Schools of Excellence to Reduce School Lag" program implemented in Mexico between 2013 and 2015, which combined additional resources with personalized academic interventions. Equity does not imply "compensating for shortcomings", but rather recognizing diversity and establishing mechanisms of preferential access for historically excluded groups. This includes:

- ⇒ Places reserved in higher education for indigenous peoples.
- ⇒ Differentiated admission for women in STEM careers.
- ⇒ Bilingual intercultural education in indigenous communities.

These policies (called affirmative action policies) have been particularly relevant in countries such as Brazil (quotas for Afro-descendants in federal universities) and Colombia (quotas for victims of the armed conflict).

The design and implementation of equity policies must be accompanied by impact evaluation mechanisms, to distinguish between good intentions and real results. Quasi-experimental and randomized evaluations (RCTs) have become relevant to analyze which measures work, for whom, and in what contexts.

For example, the PROGRESA/Oportunidades programme in Mexico showed positive effects on the enrolment, retention and performance of children living in extreme poverty, especially among women. However, subsequent evaluations pointed to marginal effects on deep learning, which led to more robust pedagogical redesigns. Despite progress, structural obstacles remain that limit the effectiveness of equity measures:

- ⇒ Institutional and political fragmentation.
- ⇒ Cultural resistance to redistribution.
- ⇒ Budget insufficiency for targeted policies.
- ⇒ Lack of articulation between levels of government.

Overcoming these challenges requires political will, technical capacity and clear regulatory frameworks. Educational equity cannot be an isolated sectoral policy, but part of a comprehensive social justice project, anchored in the right to education and the co-responsibility of the State. Educational equity measures are an essential condition for building fair, efficient and sustainable education systems. It is not enough to expand coverage or improve national averages: it is necessary to ensure that every child and young person (regardless of their origin) has a dignified and transformative educational trajectory.

To this end, it is essential to move towards progressive financing systems, differentiated pedagogical approaches, culturally relevant affirmative ac-

tions, and inequality-sensitive evaluation frameworks. Equity is not a complementary dimension of educational development: it is its ethical and strategic core.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICIES

Affirmative action policies are one of the most relevant, but also the most debated, instruments for advancing substantive equity in education. Unlike general equity measures, which seek to compensate for inequalities through the differentiated provision of resources, affirmative policies are more explicit and deliberate: they are aimed at groups that have historically been discriminated against, with the purpose of guaranteeing their representation, participation and success in educational spaces where they have traditionally been underrepresented or marginalized.

Inspired by principles of social justice, historical reparation, and collective rights, these policies have become fundamental tools to address persistent gaps based on ethnicity, race, gender, disability, and immigration status, especially in contexts of high structural inequality such as Latin America, India, South Africa, and the United States.

The concept of affirmative action has its roots in mid-twentieth-century American jurisprudence, particularly Executive Orders 10925 (1961) and 11246 (1965), which sought to eradicate racial discrimination in employment and universities. Since then, it has evolved into a set of policies that not only prohibit discrimination but also act proactively to reverse its cumulative effects (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 1997).

From a legal point of view, affirmative action is justified on the premise that formal equality of rights is not sufficient to guarantee effective access to educational opportunities for all citizens. Therefore, deliberate intervention by the State is required to remedy the structural disadvantages that certain groups face for historical, cultural, or economic reasons (Sen, 2000).

In Latin America, this approach has been recognized in various constitutions and international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (UN, 1965), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), and the constitutional frameworks of countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Brazil.

Affirmative policies adopted in the field of education can be classified into several categories, according to their mode of intervention, educational level, and targeting criteria.

ACCESS QUOTAS OR RESERVATIONS

They consist of assigning a specific percentage of educational places (especially in higher education) to students belonging to historically excluded groups. This measure has been widely implemented in countries such as India (scheduled castes and tribes), Brazil (Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples), and South Africa (black population).

In Brazil, for example, the Quota Law (No. 12.711/2012) obliges federal universities to reserve 50% of their places for students from public schools, and within that proportion, distribute the places according to racial, socioeconomic and territorial criteria. Studies by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA, 2018) show that this policy has increased the enrollment of young black, poor, and northeastern young people, without reducing academic quality in general.

DIFFERENTIATED OR SUBSIDISED ADMISSION

Instead of fixed quotas, some systems choose to adjust the entry criteria for certain groups by assigning "additional points" in admission exams, weighting socio-educational criteria or alternative access routes. This model seeks to combine equity and meritocracy, although it does not eliminate the competitive logic of selection.

In Colombia, the PAES program of the National University applies a weighting system that favors applicants from rural areas, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendant communities. According to data from DANE (2021), this strategy has contributed to a greater representation of students from peripheral regions in elite public universities.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND EXCLUSIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

A more widespread and less controversial strategy is the implementation of targeted scholarships for disadvantaged groups. Although they do not alter the admissions process, these policies seek to ensure academic permanence and success once students enter school or university.

In Mexico, the Benito Juárez Indigenous Scholarship, aimed at high school and high school students belonging to indigenous peoples, has made it possible to reduce school dropout rates in marginalized areas, although its coverage and amount are still insufficient in the face of the magnitude of the gaps (CONAPO, 2021).

DIFFERENTIATED EDUCATION WITH AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

Another dimension of affirmative educational action is the recognition of culturally relevant forms of teaching and learning, in contexts where linguistic, epistemic and territorial differences are relevant. This translates into bilingual schools, intercultural teacher training programs and adapted curriculum design.

In Bolivia and Ecuador, bilingual intercultural education is a constitutional right. However, its implementation faces tensions between symbolic recognition and material precariousness, since many of these schools operate with limited resources and lower social value (Walsh, 2009).

While affirmative action policies have shown positive effects in expanding access to higher education, reducing segregation, and recognizing collective rights, they have also generated controversy at different levels:

- ⇒ Criticism from privileged sectors, who consider these policies "discriminatory in reverse" or contrary to meritocracy.
- ⇒ Legal debates on the constitutionality of racial or ethnic quotas.
- ⇒ Doubts about its political sustainability in contexts of polarization or budget reduction.
- ⇒ Internal tensions in the benefited groups, given the perception that these measures can generate stigmatization or "doubts about merit."

In the case of Brazil, a longitudinal study by Nogueira and Santos (2020) revealed that students admitted by quota obtained academic performance comparable to or superior to those of their peers admitted through regular route, which refuted the narrative that quotas "lower standards". Likewise, the perception of belonging and identity of Afro-descendant students increased, which had a positive impact on their academic self-esteem. The following section presents three cases that allow us to observe different approaches to affirmative action in Latin America.

CASE STUDIES: UNAM, UFRJ AND UNAL

UNAM, as the higher education institution with the highest enrollment in Mexico, does not formally apply an ethnic or racial quota system. However, it has developed strategies aimed at expanding access for students from marginalized sectors, especially through a territorialized admission policy and differentiated support according to socioeconomic status.

A key measure has been the establishment of peripheral campuses (such as FES Acatlán, FES Iztacala, FES Zaragoza and ENES León), designed to bring the university closer to regions with less presence of higher education. Added to this is the creation of the Open University and Distance Education System (SUAYED), which allows young people with fewer resources to study without leaving their communities.

On the other hand, programs such as the Maintenance Scholarship, the Excellence Scholarship, the Scholarship for Indigenous Students and the UNAM PILARES seek not only to guarantee entry, but also permanence and effective graduation. According to the General Directorate of Educational Guidance and Care (DGOAE, 2022), these programs have contributed to reducing dropout in the first years of the career among low-income students.

Despite these efforts, recent studies (Rojas & Robles, 2021) have indicated that the socioeconomic profile of accepted applicants continues to be biased towards the middle and upper sectors, due to the high selectivity of the entrance exam and the unequal prior academic preparation. This has reopened the debate on the relevance of implementing more explicit affirmative actions, such as socio-educational weightings or alternative routes of entry.

For its part, UFRJ was one of the first federal universities in Brazil to implement a quota system before the enactment of the Federal Quota Law in 2012. Since the early 2000s, it has implemented reservation of places for students of African descent, indigenous people, and public-school graduates, based on racial, ethnic, and income criteria.

After the enactment of Law 12.711/2012, all federal universities (including UFRJ) adopted a system that reserves 50% of the vacancies for students

from public schools, subdividing that percentage according to skin color, family income per capita, and belonging to indigenous peoples.

A study by the Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores Negros (ABPN, 2019) showed that this policy has managed to double the presence of black and mixed students in highly competitive careers such as medicine, law, or engineering. In addition, academic data reveal that students admitted by quotas have academic performance rates similar to or higher than those of their non-cotista classmates, which challenges prejudices about "lower merit".

However, internal tensions linked to the verification of racial self-declaration have been reported, especially in cases of students who try to access quotas without corresponding to the intended group. This has led to the creation of hetero-identification commissions, which have sparked ethical debates around institutional racial recognition.

On the other hand, the National University of Colombia has developed for more than two decades a special admission policy that seeks to correct inequalities in access to higher education derived from the armed conflict, territorial exclusion and ethnic-racial discrimination. Among the most outstanding programs are:

- ⇒ Special admission for indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, with reserved places in all the country's campuses and academic and cultural accompaniment.
- ⇒ PAES Program (Special Admission and Academic Permanence Program), which assigns places to students from municipalities with low human development indexes, especially from municipalities in the Pacific, the Amazon, and regions affected by the armed conflict.
- ⇒ Admission of victims of the internal armed conflict, with psycho-social accompaniment and economic support.

A report by the Observatory of the Colombian University (2021) indicates that, thanks to these policies, UNAL has increased the enrollment of indigenous and Afro-descendant students by more than 300% in the last 15 years. In addition, it has implemented academic tutoring, emotional support and teacher training programs in intercultural pedagogy.

UNAL's experience shows that affirmative policies can go beyond access, towards a profound institutional transformation that includes the revision of the curriculum, the sensitization of the university community and the recognition of one's own knowledge (see table 4).

Table 4

Approach to affirmative action in case studies in Latin America.

University	Main form of affirmative action	Key beneficiary groups	Main challenges
UNAM (Mexico)	Territorialization, focused scholarships.	Indigenous students, marginalized areas.	Selectivity and inequality of origin.
UFRJ (Brazil)	Racial and socioeconomic quotas.	Afro-descendants, indigenous, poor.	Racial discrimination and verification.
UNAL (Colombia)	Special admission and comprehensive approach.	Indigenous, Afro-descendants, victims.	Financial sustainability and support.

Note: Prepared by the author based on institutional and academic sources.

The cases show that, to be effective, affirmative policies must be comprehensive and articulated: they must combine access with permanence, symbolic recognition with pedagogical transformation, and targeting with public legitimacy.

Affirmative policies in education imply a profound transformation of the social pact around equality. It is not only a matter of redistributing resources, but of redefining the value of diversity, the place of the State in historical reparation, and the limits of meritocracy in profoundly unequal societies. For these policies to be effective and sustainable, they must meet certain conditions:

- ⇒ Solid legal basis and social legitimacy.
- ⇒ Rigorous evaluation mechanisms, both quantitative and qualitative.
- ⇒ Combined with structural measures to improve education, to prevent quotas from becoming "narrow doors to exclusionary systems".
- ⇒ Participation of target groups, not only as beneficiaries, but also as political and epistemic subjects.

In addition, it is necessary to extend the debate to new dimensions of affirmative action, such as the inclusion of people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+

students, young people in forced mobility, and victims of structural violence, who continue to be marginalized from the dominant educational discourse.

Affirmative action policies are a powerful tool for building educational equity from a transformative, non-welfare-based perspective. By recognizing inequalities as the result of historical processes of exclusion and not only as individual shortcomings, but these policies also make it possible to re-politicize education and place the rights of historically invisible groups at the center of the public agenda.

Its future will depend both on its technical soundness and on the ability to build democratic consensus around the value of diversity, social justice and the universal right to a decent education. In this sense, affirmative action is a set of compensatory measures and an ethical and political proposal to redefine equality in societies marked by structural inequality.

CONCLUSIONS

Inequality in education is a structural reflection of the social, economic, cultural and territorial disparities present in our societies. Throughout this chapter, it has been shown how educational gaps not only persist but are configured as mechanisms that perpetuate intergenerational social inequality. These gaps are manifested in multiple dimensions: unequal access to quality educational services, differences in levels of academic achievement, segmentation of educational offerings, and insufficient support for vulnerable populations.

One of the main findings of the chapter is that inequalities in education are not natural or inevitable phenomena, but the result of historical, political and structural decisions. Therefore, overcoming them requires deliberate interventions from an equity approach that recognizes differences and seeks to compensate for structural disadvantages. Equity, understood as the guiding principle of education policy, implies designing differentiated policies that ensure real opportunities for all, particularly for those groups that have been historically excluded.

Educational equity measures are fundamental instruments for transforming the conditions of inequality in the education system. Its effectiveness

depends on an adequate identification of the target populations, a sufficient allocation of resources, a robust institutional design and the capacity for evaluation and monitoring. The typology presented allows us to understand that interventions must cover all stages of the educational trajectory: from early access, through permanence, to achieving significant learning achievements.

In this sense, the experiences of countries such as Uruguay, Brazil or Colombia show that it is possible to move towards more equitable systems when there is political will, institutional capacity and commitment to educational justice. These policies improve educational indicators and generate positive impacts on other dimensions of human development, such as health, employment and citizen participation.

Affirmative action policies, on the other hand, illustrate a concrete way to reduce structural inequalities through compensatory mechanisms. College fees, targeted scholarships, and academic support programs, among others, have proven effective in improving access to and performance for historically marginalized populations. However, these policies face political and social resistance, so their legitimacy must be built on empirical evidence, solid regulatory frameworks, and a public narrative that claims the right to equity.

It is also crucial to highlight the role of educational financing as an enabling condition for any equity policy. Without adequate resources, intentions remain on paper. But it is also important to point out that it is not enough to spend more, but it is necessary to spend better, that is, with criteria of efficiency, transparency and targeting. The allocation of resources must be directed to where they are most needed: to the schools, students and communities that face the greatest challenges.

Another key element addressed is the need to have information and monitoring systems that allow gaps to be identified, interventions to be evaluated and accountability to be assessed. The construction of equity indicators, such as parity indices, completion rates by socioeconomic level, and disaggregated levels of academic achievement, should become standard practice of ministries of education and statistical institutes.

In short, moving towards educational equity requires a comprehensive transformation of the education system. This transformation must articulate pedagogical, institutional, financial and social components, and promote the participation of teachers, students, families and communities. Equity cannot be seen as an accessory or secondary objective, but as the ethical and strategic core of all educational policy.

From a technical and political perspective, overcoming educational inequality is an indispensable condition for sustainable development, social cohesion and the construction of inclusive democracies. As Sen (1999) argues, development should be understood as the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy; and education, as a fundamental capacity, is one of the main tools to achieve this. Therefore, guaranteeing educational equity is a moral imperative and an intelligent strategy to build fairer, more resilient and productive societies.

Finally, this chapter invites us to critically reflect on the role of the State, public policies and social actors in the construction of an education that does not reproduce inequalities but rather contributes to overcoming them. Educational equity is not a distant goal, but a concrete possibility that requires commitment, innovation and collective responsibility.

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