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# Do educational support policies always favour overcoming inequalities? The situation in Spain

C. PETREÑAS ET AL.

Disability & Society



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## Abstract

Early school leaving (ESL) is a serious concern for education authorities in many countries such as Spain. This investigation is aimed at identifying the weak points of educational support policies and making proposals to strengthen them. The article reviews more than 40 documents, including state-level and regional-level laws and regulations about educational support. The analysis of the legal framework was based on three relevant axes for the educational support configuration: support needs attribution, support strategies and agents of support. These three axes shed light on how education policies can prevent education systems from guaranteeing inclusive education. Findings show the need to de-assign the individual attribution of needs that remains directly or indirectly underpinned by Spanish regulations. Regarding support strategies, policies should foster learning acceleration rather than adaptive and low expectation strategies. Finally, more legal guidance is needed to scaffold support agents' real involvement.

## Points of interest

- Despite having high rates of early schooling, Spain is not among those countries that have lower rates of early school leaving (ESL). The implementation of support measures is key to overcoming inequalities.
- This review of education policies found that the guidelines addressed to Spanish schools include statements that are ambiguous or contradict the inclusion principles.
- This article provides a useful framework for schools and policymakers to analyse policies and guidelines regarding educational support based on how these address students' needs, strategies and measures implemented, and all the people involved.
- The analysis of Spanish official documents shows a tendency to attribute learning difficulties to the students themselves, especially when they are diagnosed with any disability.
- Support policies are crucial to promote inclusive educational support. However, support guidelines are still influenced by clinical models, over reliance on curricular adaptation and student segregation.

**Keywords:** Early school leaving (ESL); educational support; education policies; inclusive education; agents of support; support strategies

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## Introduction

According to data compiled by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2019), most education systems in Europe are guided by the principle of inclusion. Data from 29 European countries showed that the average enrolment rate in mainstream education was 99.7% in 2016 (European Commission 2018). However, none of them achieved 100% enrolment in inclusive settings. Moreover, these rates only showed students' location; therefore, more information is needed about their participation and achievements in the mainstream to understand how inclusion works. In addition to the segregated special settings, this report also showed that every country used different forms of segregated grouping within mainstream schools. Thus, commitment to inclusion is more theoretical than practical.

Spain has opted for a comprehensive and inclusive education system (BOE 2013). Comprehension consists in guaranteeing a common educational pathway for everyone, not differentiated by itineraries during compulsory schooling. UNESCO (2009) defined inclusive education as a school transformation process that responds to student diversity by increasing their participation in learning, culture and communities and reducing their exclusion from the regular education system. This requires the presence, participation and achievements of the entire school-age population, irrespective of their origin, culture or capacities. But this comprehensive and inclusive nature of the system is being questioned by the rate of early leavers from education and training (ELETs), those between the ages of 18 and 24 who have at most completed the compulsory secondary level but did not continue studying. Spain had almost doubled the European average of ELETs (18.3% and 10.6%, respectively) in 2017 (Eurostat 2019). However, this figure was much lower than that of 2009, when it reached 30.9%. ESL is not a phenomenon that appears suddenly at the end of compulsory or post-compulsory non-tertiary education. On the contrary, it has its roots in the previous stages in the form of demotivation, disinterest or detachment. Its causes are multiple, with social and attitude components. It affects mainly vulnerable social groups, as extensive sociological research has shown (Julià, Escapa, and Mari-Klose 2015). In fact, these groups are over-represented in special education (Morgan et al. 2017). In this article, we will focus on Spanish educational

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support policies and the practices that emerge from these policies to show that many of these practices not only do not contribute to reducing the ESL scourge, they can increase it, thereby increasing the system's inequalities. Our analysis focuses on Spain, but the findings could also be useful for analysing educational support in different countries.

## The impact of early school leaving

ESL is not just a question of numbers, but rather reflects hard personal realities with social and economic significance. A large study by the European Commission found that population who leave their studies early in EU countries have an unemployment rate of 41%, more than 17 points above youth unemployment rates for the same area (European-Commission 2014). However, the consequences of ESL are not limited to the labour sphere, they also affect other areas related to the quality of life, such as physical and mental health. Various investigations alert to the increased risk of depression among uneducated and unemployed young people and their propensity for physical and mental problems, as well as their lower participation in democratic processes and political activities (European-Commission/EACEA/-Eurydice/Cedefop 2014; OECD 2015).

As other studies also point out, ESL has an impact on the country's social and economic development (Bhorat, Cassim, and Tseng 2016). Increases in unemployment rates in any country include a reduction in economic growth and fiscal revenues (Calero, Gil, and Fenández 2011). ESL data challenge one of the main purposes of any modern education system: reducing inequalities and contributing to social cohesion.

## Two internal indicators that may not explain ESL rates

In order to analyse education policies that, as internal causes, could explain the rate of abandonment, we must take into account two indicators which are often used to explain ESL, but which

fail to do so in Spain.

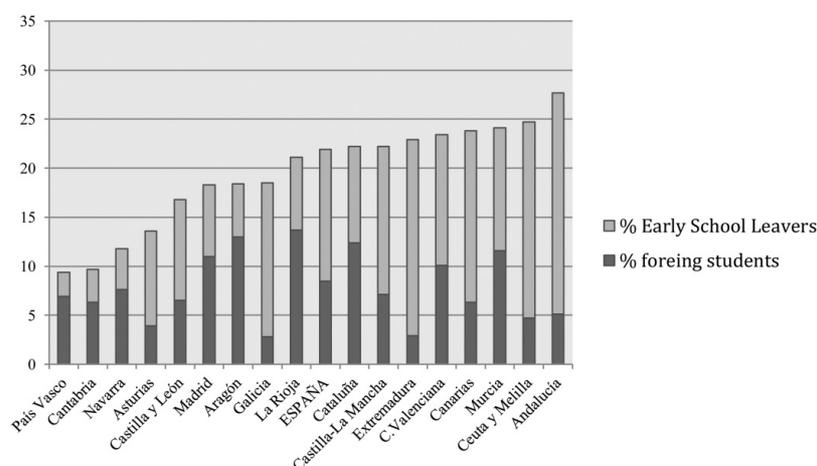
The first one refers to the preschool offer. In this sense, Spain has a school enrolment rate for 3-year-olds of 28.6%, well above the average of the OECD countries (3.5%) and that of the EU 21 countries (4%). Spain reached 98.7% in the 3 and 4-year-old tranche, also surpassing the OECD average (74.9%) and the EU21 (81.6%) (MECD2013a). Recent data from the OECD (MECD2015a; OECD 2013,2015) reflect the benefits of early schooling for later education. It remains contradictory however, that an education system with almost universal inclusion in Early Childhood Education (3–5 years) and a school offer for 0–3 year-olds significantly larger than in other European countries, has and the population that fail to reach the first stage of

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Secondary Education (MECD 2013b). Therefore, initial age at school commencement does not seem to explain the high rates of ESL that occur in Spain.

Another indicator is the percentage of immigrant school population. The majority of research correlating academic performance and immigration shows that immigrant students, especially first-generation students, have a significant academic backwardness in relation to their native peers partly explained by lack of roots, language problems and other social elements (Subero, Vila, and Esteban-Guidart 2015). However, while experiencing a migration process may cause a temporary disadvantage, other factors may be more directly responsible for dropping out of school (Cordero, Pedraja, and Simancas 2015). When comparing the percentage of students of foreign origin and the ESL rates per region, there are Autonomous Communities (AC) with a percentage of foreign students above the Spanish average (8.5%), but with an ESL rate below the average (21.9%) and vice versa (Figure 1). This figure, calculated using data from the MECD (2015a), shows that the percentage of students of foreign origin does not correlate with the number of early leavers from education and training of each AC. For instance, the Community of Aragon has 13% of students of foreign origin, and an ESL of 18.4%, while Andalucía, with only 5.1% of students of foreign origin, has an ESL of 27.7%.

**Figure 1. Percentage of ESL and foreign students by Autonomous Communities.**Source: INE. Survey of active population. Data for 2014. (MECD2015a). (Own elaboration). The percentage of early school leaving includes, in obscurity, that of non -university foreign students.



Neither early schooling nor the proportion of immigrant students appear to be relevant elements to understand the high ESL index in Spain. We could do a similar exercise with other internal elements, for example, the ratio of students per classroom or the extension of school hours, and the results would be similar. This finding is relevant in order to strengthen the transformation of educational support policies and practices.

### Voices on educational support and policy analysis

There is research focusing on the voices of young people about physical barriers as well as about more challenging cultural and institutional barriers (Genova 2015; Leeuw, Boer, and Minaert 2018; Wenham 2019). Calderón-Almendros (2018) showed a critical perspective of inclusion in Spain due to the breach of children's right to education when any disability is involved. Poverty and other causes of exclusion from education are also denounced (Fernández-Alonso et al. 2017). Research on inclusive education conducted in Spain also emphasizes the participation of all the stakeholders in decision-making (Puigdemívol, Molina, Sabando, Gómez and Petreñas, 2017).

Few investigations identified the role attributed to the main school stakeholders in the legal framework (Azorín and Muijs 2017; Graham 2018; Shun wing and Wai Kwan Gail 2015). Delving

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education policies, there are several articles acknowledging the importance of their voices in policymaking and how their voices are heard (Hall 2017; Warren and Marciano 2018). Graham (2018) examined how students' participation was articulated in education policies in Australia. They found a lack of clarity and cohesion across education policy about what participation means and how and where it can occur. This raises questions about how policies are supporting the participation of the main stakeholders in the education system.

Regulations are relevant to understand how education systems are meant to operate and how they utilise their resources. The current literature is more focused on identifying the perspective of these stakeholders and the model their practices are based on (Mena, Rueda, and Sarrionandia 2019). In this sense, Arduin (2015) reviewed the English, Irish, Finnish and Norwegian legal framework to identify the values that underpin the structure of these education systems and its approach to disability and inclusion, understanding the barriers that prevent education systems from guaranteeing inclusive education. She found a correlation between the ideology predominant in society and its approach to disability and inclusive education. Thus, some education policies can be promoting practices based on exclusion, despite being defined as inclusive.

### Contextualisation

For the present policy analysis, it should be noted that the Spanish state transferred the competences in formal education to the ACs in 1980. Since

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then, the education system of each AC has been regulated by the general state laws, which provide an organizational framework and dictate 40% of the curriculum (Collet-Sabé 2017), and thereafter, by autonomous laws, which are more specific. For this reason, this paper considers both state- and AC-level legislation and guidelines.

Our study specifically looks into the laws and rules that guide inclusion practices in the Spanish education system. We analyse how these documents, that guide the design and deployment of educational support policies reveal ACs Governments' (hidden) perspectives on inclusion. We aim to identify ambiguities, contradictions and misguidances that fail to clearly promote inclusive practices.

In consequence, and considering this framework, the objectives of this article are: [1] to analyse support policies and practices aimed at the most vulnerable students; [2] to identify the role of educational support in overcoming ESL and [3] to propose changes aimed at increasing the effectiveness of educational support measures in overcoming ESL and improving inclusiveness within the education system.

**Research process**

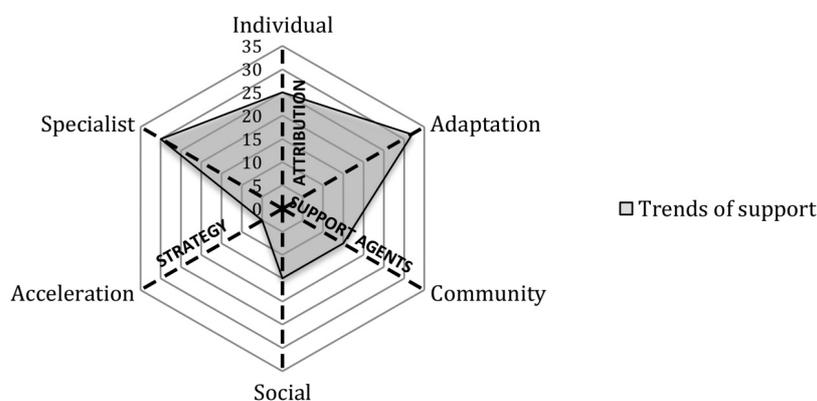
Therefore, following our objectives, we analyse educational support policies and practices which may have a more direct impact on ESL percentages. We understand by policy the guidelines and decision making that construct the organization and management of educational support, both at the education system level and at the school level. And we understand by practices, the actions carried out in schools, whether or not they are consistent with those guidelines.

The review process has two lines: first, we followed a deductive analysis procedure based on the main components of the educational support policies to select articles from ERIC and WOS databases. Second, we analysed data from three main sources: (1) The European Commission framework; (2) The Spanish Ministry of Education’s official documents with regulations aimed at organizing and promoting educational support and reducing school failure, a reference to state-level policies; (3) the same official documents but at regional-level (AC), also including guidance documents.

With regard to the analysis of the official documents and considering their complexity, we conducted a two-phase review: the goal of the first phase was to inductively identify analysis categories based on previous research; then, we used these categories to carry out in-depth analysis of the official documents. The three categories identified will serve to describe the possible forms of educational support. Therefore, to better organize results and conclusions we refer to them as axes: [1] axis of attribution: to what or to whom

is the origin of needs or difficulties that need support attributed? Where are support actions targeted? Who are they targeting? (Bruggink, Meijer, Goei, and Koot2014); [2] strategy axis: defines the direction and shape adopted by recommended support actions (Slavin 2017); and [3] support agents’ axis: defines the involvement level of different support agents (Puigdemívol et al. 2017) (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Basic axes for the analysis of educational support.**



Thus, this is a legal framework study aimed at identifying the weak points of educational support policies that may contribute to explain why support practices aren’t effective enough to reduce the high ESL rates in Spain, putting forth some proposals to strengthen them. Hence, one limitation of these kind of review studies is that they don’t contain the first-hand voices of the different stakeholders affected.

[The dark polygon exemplifies the inclusive profile from a school. Each axis scores on both sides because schools’ policies and practice are not always in the same direction, this is not a black or white thing (ex. The same school can implement some adaptive strategies while others are guided by the principle of acceleration). The bottom location of the dark polygon -not in this case- is an indication of better inclusion].

**Results**

The results from this study are presented following the three axes of analysis aforementioned: support needs attribution, support strategies, and agents of support.

**Support needs attribution**

Regarding attribution, all the documents consulted seem biased towards the individual attribution to the student’s limitations. The national ‘Law to

Improve the Quality of Education’ (BOE2013) uses the concept of specific educational support needs without specifying its definition. A subsequent text (BOE 2014) specifies that this definition includes students who require support because of social circumstances, physical, mental or sensory disability or that manifest serious behavioural disorders, and also includes students with high intellectual abilities and those who have been integrated late on into the Spanish education system (p.12). Except for the reference to high-capacity students, the concept of ‘specific needs for educational support’ replaces that of special educational needs (SEN) in its accepted definition (Warnock-Report 1978). In this sense, and based on Royal Decree 1105/2014 (BOE 2015), the document addressed to secondary and upper-secondary education (MECD n.d.) describes students with specific need for educational support as:

...requiring educational attention different from the norm by presenting special educational needs, specific learning difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), high intellectual capacities, by having joined the education system late on, or because of personal characteristics or school background, with the aim of helping them reach their maximum possible personal capacities and, in all cases, the objectives established for the general student population. (p. 2)

Although social circumstances are mentioned, needs are attributed to the student: students are those ‘who present them’. That is why we can speak of a tendency to reify such needs. Perhaps because of this, in no document have we found the definition of ‘special educational needs’ or ‘specific educational support needs’. What we find is only the description of the ‘subject’ that ‘supposedly’ presents or possesses these needs. For example, the Government of Extremadura states that ‘Pupils will be considered as a subject with SEN when they require, for a period of schooling or throughout it, certain specific educational support and attention derived from a disability or serious behavioural disorders’ (Diario-Oficial-de-Extremadura 2014). The government of Andalucía uses the same text but adds students with developmental disorders or with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Junta-de-Andalucia2015). The Basque Government makes a very detailed classification of students with specific educational support needs without deviating from this reified vision. Similar schemes are found in other communities (BOCM 2015a; Boletín-Oficial-de-Aragón2014; Boletín-Oficial-de-Canarias2011; Boletín-Oficial-de-Cantabria2014; Boletín-Oficial-de-Navarra1998; Boletín-Oficial-Illes-Balears2011; Boletín-Oficial-

Región-de-Murcia 2009; Diario-oficial-de-Castilla-La-Mancha 2013; Diario-Oficial-de-Galicia 2007; GOVA 2001; Junta-de-Castilla-León 2007).

In a guiding document from the Catalan Government (GENCAT2015), we find a definition for Special Education Needs as the mismatch between the student's abilities and the contextual

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that this mismatch arises from the interaction between the student's personal conditions and the environment in which they develop, which would be an attempt to de-assign the needs attribution. However, it goes on to point out that such needs 'derive from ...', adding a list of disabilities very similar to those we have seen in previous documents.

The emphasis of different administrations on talking about 'students with needs' rather than the needs themselves or the barriers that can generate them contributes to the persistence of a vision of support through 'deficit'.

### Support strategies or inclusion resistance?

All the revised documents coincide in highlighting the inclusive principles that inspire them. However, in the specific recommendations, these principles seem to be diluted. Clear examples are the policies toward students incorporated late on. For instance, the Ministry of Education's regulation (BOE2007) establishes that 'those who present a lag in their curricular competence of more than one cycle [two academic years] may be enrolled in the year immediately below that of their age' (article 21.5). For those students, neither the inclusion principle nor the learning expectations of progress and learning acceleration seem to prevail.

As a support strategy, all education administrations emphasize curricular measures and, in a specific way, adaptations. In Catalonia, the measures established for support, curricular accommodation and organization are known as Individualized Plans (IP). The problem is that the documents consulted do not clearly state that when the nature of the student's difficulties is social, significant adaptations (modifying contents and levels) should not be applied, since they suppose an unjustified reduction of their progress expectations. For example, the Andalucía Government (Boletín-Oficial-de-la-Junta-de-Andalucía2008) establishes that curricular adaptation programs are also targeted at students who arrive late into the education system and adaptations are made when 'the curricular gap in comparison to the students age group makes the modification of the curriculum's elements necessary, including objectives and the evaluation criteria at the educational stage' (Article 13, 1.b.)

Finally, where we find greater ambiguity and contradiction with the inclusive principles is in the student's grouping references. Some communities, such as Extremadura (Diario-Oficial-de-Extremadura 2014) explicitly promote grouping by learning levels as a measure of attention to diversity (p. 31564). Others, such as Madrid (BOCM2016), promote the level grouping in instrumental areas for students with negative evaluations in the previous year, those incorporated late and those with learning difficulties. In all these cases it is expected that:

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Student groups of Spanish Language and Literature and Mathematics, can be divided into an ordinary group and a reinforcement group from that ordinary group in the same time frame; two ordinary groups can also be divided to create a reinforcement group from those two ordinary groups, provided that group division takes place in the same instrumental areas. (Article 9.3b)

It is, therefore, a question of establishing groups according to their academic level (ability groups). There are many AC that include these groups as a support strategy, while others show an ambiguous position on this. In later school years, these practices are increased. In the upper stage of secondary education, this measure is known as curricular diversification. The community of Madrid (BOCM2007) establishes that students who follow a curricular diversification program will be grouped into 'specific diversification groups', although they will study the subjects of Foreign Language, Music, Arts and Crafts, and Physical Education in their reference group (p. 2). The Government of Catalonia (GENCAT2013) proposed two modalities of curricular diversification: A (carried out in the education centre) and B (managed by the education centre but implemented in part or entirely elsewhere) (p. 19). In addition, the Catalan Government created the so-called Shared School Units as an extraordinary measure for students with 'school environment maladjustment and social exclusion risk' (p. 25 et seq.). The Basque Country also contemplates curricular diversification programmes, theoretically aimed at getting through the upper stage of secondary education (GOVA 2007), as the basis of vocational education for students that do not achieve secondary education goals (p. 23 et seq.).

The provision of specific (segregated) classrooms as a 'support' resource is diverse, ranging from linking classrooms (GOVA 2012a), reception (GENCAT 2005) or linguistic immersion for immigrant students (Gobierno-de-La-Rioja2016a), to special education classrooms (BOCM2015b) for pupils with SEN. There are also external classrooms (Gobierno-de-La-Rioja2014) or shared educational spaces[9], for students with 'serious difficulties of school adaptation'; specialized classrooms for 'seriously disabled students', such as Special Education units (Diario-Oficial-de-Castilla-La-Mancha2016), educational therapeutic classrooms (Gobierno-de-La-Rioja 2016b) and comprehensive support classrooms (GENCAT2015); or classrooms for students with ASD (Autism Spectre Disorder) (Diario-Oficial-de-Extremadura2015) which are also called open classrooms (Diario-oficial-de-Castilla-La-Mancha 2014), stable classrooms (GOVA 2012b) or specific units for communication and language (DOCV 2016).

Although there are exceptions, in most cases these strategies become exclusion rather than support mechanisms. Through them, segregation of the most vulnerable students is perpetuated, a reflection of the tendency towards homogeneity that, until today, has been affecting inclusive policies.

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### Agent participation

All regional regulations consulted emphasize the importance of family participation. For example, the Government of Aragon (Boletín-Oficial-de-Aragón2014) points out that educational community participation in teaching and learning processes is one of the successful educational activities (p.2827). However, there is also a lack of precision on how and at what level this participation can be achieved.

Different communities establish, from the outset of the Early Years Education stage, the right of parents, and/or legal guardians to participate in their children's school education. This is stated in the Basque Country's regulations (BOPV 2015):

Based on their Educational Project, the centres will encourage educational commitments between families or legal guardians and the centre in order to carry out activities that families, teachers and students commit to fulfil so that the objectives and basic competencies planned for this educational stage are achieved. (Article 19.1)

But specific participation in the adoption of curricular measures does not seem easy. Some communities, such as Catalonia (DOGC2013), establish that both parents and students will be 'heard' when selecting measures or curricular adaptations. In contrast, we find other documents that obviate family participation. However, where families identify administration ambiguity more clearly is in the decision making around their children's schooling. In some cases, family opinions must be included in the report on schooling, as in the Balearic Islands Community (Boletín-Oficial-Illes-Balears 2011). Nevertheless, both the proposal and the final decision on schooling rests with the administration:

It is the education counsellor's responsibility, based on the conclusions of the psycho-pedagogical report, to propose the appropriate schooling modality and to reflect it in the schooling report, in which the opinion of parents or legal guardians must be recorded. (Article 20.14)

All this gives rise to a more theoretical rather than pragmatic recognition of the family role; the ambiguity of their role and their rights and obligations do not foster their empowerment as an educational agent since regulations place them at a subordinate level.

## Discussion: educational support as a success tool

Results shed light on three main axes in which educational support policies and practices could improve significantly. We discuss them following the three axes of analysis to highlight potential changes that could improve support policies and practices.

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### Overcome individual attribution

To think that the student is the source of their own difficulties, which we have described as a reification of difficulty, is a mistake that can contaminate our perception of the student and their needs. Individual attribution fits into a medical model of support, in which a specialist is supposed to treat the student's present anomaly, seeking their recovery (Hughes 2000). This article reflects a dominance of the medical-neoliberal model (Whitburn, Moss, and O'Mara 2017), entailing a significant resistance to reaching a more interactive model that better contributes to overcoming participation and learning barriers. The medical model does not work because learning problems always have a much more contextual character (Kelly 2010).

In the students' development the different agents involved, including students themselves, influence the expectations placed upon their progress (Mortier et al. 2011). When the need of support is perceived to come from social origin (situation of poverty, immigration, ethnicity or different culture), we should not find it difficult to understand that we are not faced with needs that have their origin within the student. However, when we evaluate the type of support needed, we tend to prioritize individual interventions, perhaps influenced by stereotypes about the student, thus falling into reification: the student is the problem! (Botcher and Danmeyer 2012; Shaw, Chan, and McMahon 2012). A recent study on educational support discourses conducted in Finland's upper secondary education shows how stigmatization and individual deficit discourse resulted in organizing the support individually and privately, even though their educational policies promote a communal and collaborative support (Niemi and Laaksonen 2020). This same individual attribution is what prevents us from adopting organizational or institutional policies and actions that could be more effective than the individual support itself (Cox 2017; Puigdemívol et al. 2017). This partially explains why, despite the promulgation of 'inclusive policies' in so many countries, inequalities are persisting.

On the other hand, when we are faced with a disability, we cannot ignore the weight that physical, sensory or psychological limitations have on the student. However, we must take into account that these limitations interact with the rest of their personal characteristics and with the environment in which they operate, including, of course, the school (Botcher and Danmeyer 2012; Shaw et al. 2012). The student's disability is not the result of a deficit (be it physical or mental), but its interaction with the rest of the student's characteristics and with the environment, thus adopting a marked social character (Whitburn 2015).

This perspective is consistent with the Barriers to Learning and Participation (BLP) (Booth and Ainscove 2002; Muijs et al. 2010, Sermier and Bless 2013). Identifying these BLPs and helping

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constitutes a fundamental support practice for the student with difficulties and, in addition, it usually brings a global improvement to the quality of our teaching practices. Supporting inclusive environments does not only not harm the group of students, but also has positive effects on learning for all students (Sermier and Bless 2013). In short, support needs must be viewed from a contextual perspective and not as a mere result of deficit.

### From adaptation to acceleration

Another important limitation that can be deduced from the analysis carried out is the emphasis that different regulations place on the concept of 'adaptation' and the lack of references to *learning acceleration*. If support emphasis is centred on adapting education to the student's level of knowledge (prior knowledge), then we do not encourage students with difficulties to reduce the distance that separates them from their peers. Already in the 1930s Vygotsky (1978) criticized colleagues like Binet and others for maintaining that development was always a learning prerequisite, and assuming that lack of maturity prevented learning a particular subject or that all instruction was useless (p. 124). In this sense, he defended the key element of his Zone of Proximal Development theory.

According to Vygotsky's theory, if we deny a 9-year-old student who does not know how to subtract the possibility of interacting with their peers when they are solving problems involving division, we are holding back their own learning. If, on the other hand, even though we are aware of their difficulties, our point of reference is what the learner can do with the help of more advanced students, we will have a better chance of accelerating their learning (Pitcock and Seidel 2015). The student will not be able to solve the division, but they will understand the problem, discuss it with their colleagues, think about its possible resolution and acquire the concept of division, even if only in an intuitive way.

Accelerated learning is supported by Robert Slavin's research and is aimed at preschool as well as secondary education levels. The results of this investigation were especially positive among the most vulnerable populations (Slavin, Lake, Davis, and Madden 2017). John Hattie's relevant meta-synthesis showed eleven components of educational activity that clearly correlate with learning achievements. One of them was accelerated learning (Hattie 2009; Rubie-Davies, Hattie and Hamilton 2006). A case-study investigation on the role of the community in supporting learning, carried out in Spain, provided explicit examples of this effect (Puigdemívol et al. 2017). In that case, accelerated learning was also supported by peer interaction and the presence of volunteers within the classroom.

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In contrast with the above, regional governments have many documents on curricular adaptations or Individual Plans (IP). These adaptations may be essential for intellectually disabled students, but they may be counterproductive for students who are not disabled. Today we understand the strong influence that expectations have in students' achievement (Jacobs, Beck, and Crowell 2014; Murata 2013). To suggest a reduction of these expectations when the origin of their difficulties is social is a mistake that can be very detrimental for the future of these students. For this reason, significant adaptations should be applied only in cases where a significant intellectual limitation reduces learning opportunities. Even then, we should not underestimate the student's potential for progress in their interaction with more advanced peers.

Finally, we have detected grouping by learning levels as a recommended strategy to support diversity. A lot of research today shows that groups by learning level not only do not achieve significant improvements among high-level students but are clearly detrimental to students with lower levels of attainment (Hamilton and O'Hara 2011; Ireson, Hallam, and Hurley 2005; Macqueen 2013). Finland, for example, had already abolished *ability grouping* in the 1985 reform (OECD 2010). Despite the fact that we also have research that shows some negative effects of level groups (Garrett and Hong 2016), management guidelines should be explicit in this regard to avoid the harm caused by these practices. This kind of support strategy together with other support practices such as the specific classrooms for foreign students seek to compensate the difference through segregation (González-Faraco, González-Falcón, and Rodríguez-Izquierdo 2020). Thus, these so-called 'inclusive policies' are recommending practices that lead to segregation, discrimination and exclusion. This may partially explain why Spain is not achieving the inclusion rates expected.

### Collaborative work and participation

All education administrations emphasize the principle of collaboration between support professionals and families. But this principle is poorly defined and involves the subordinate participation of families.

Educational support improves in a collaboration context, and in this sense, we cannot ignore the peers' role nor the role of other support stakeholders. In the revised guidelines that define disability types and their detection, curricular adaptations and ways of grouping students, there is no mention, for example, of co-teaching, a fundamental strategy for inclusive support, which requires several teachers working together in the classroom (Gurgur and Uzuner 2011). Therefore, we find a gap between official orientations and evidence on educational support. Co-teaching

arrangements require common guidelines to facilitate efficient and inclusion-oriented teamwork, including other support stakeholders such as psychologists, paraprofessionals or volunteers.

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In the inclusive school framework, classroom support is by far the most effective form of educational support (Kelly 2010; Stukalina 2010), in contrast to the poor effectiveness and even counterproductive effects of other practices such as support outside the classroom (Turner 2014) or level groups (Araújo 2007). In this sense, research reviewing the classroom support effect in the class-group is clear: non-disabled students recognize that this support also benefits them (Mortier et al. 2011).

Regarding family participation, currently available research shows its influence on student progress. This was highlighted by a study conducted in five Canadian districts (Hands 2013) consisting of programs aimed at increasing family participation and the participation of families representing cultural diversity. Other research shows the potential for family involvement in the case of students from disadvantaged groups like migrants (Schoorman, Zainuddin, and Sena 2011) and those aimed at combating ESL (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, and Savolainen 2015). Moreover, family participation is severely hampered, especially in the most disadvantaged social environments, when a bureaucratized vision of such participation prevails and the consequent rigidity in addressing social problems arises in the school and the community (Van den Berg and Van Reekum 2011). The same problem is stated among legislation addressed at ensuring children's meaningful involvement in decision-making, specifically among the most vulnerable students (Riddell and Carmichael 2019). Thus, policies may not be properly translated into practices to achieve a truly inclusive system capable of overcoming inequalities.

Research on disability also highlights the beneficial effect of family involvement in support: directed toward students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Reupert, Deppeler, and Sharma 2015), and with intellectual disabilities (McCloskey 2010; Mengoni, Bardsley, and Oates 2015). This research addresses the role of families as support facilitators or in support evaluation and monitoring (Mengoni, Bardsley, and Oates 2015). It also shows that when parents feel heard and their contribution is recognized, they are actively involved with school and supporting their children; this has an essential effect on their children's school progress (Trumbull and Rtohsstein-Fisch 2011).

## Conclusions

After an extensive review of the documents on educational support produced by the Ministry of Education and the different Autonomous Communities in Spain, we have been able to identify the most relevant aspects of educational support orientation in the Spanish education system.

We highlight the emphasis on the individual attribution of student needs. Such attribution creates a difficulty in understanding the role of barriers in

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learning and participation and, above all, limits the possibilities for educational support not focused exclusively on the student, but rather on the student's context. This individual attribution leads to justifying traditional forms of support that have shown their inefficiency, such as support outside the classroom or level groups.

Furthermore, the methodology of educational support shows the prominence of adaptive strategies excessively focused on the student's previous knowledge and on programs that adapt and depart from them, obviating the social and learning interactive dimensions. Adaptive supports tend to make the learning gap between the student and their peers chronic, if not bigger. That is why it is so important to introduce the learning acceleration concept in educational support.

Finally, from a social and interactive perspective, it is important that support measures involve all the agents in playing a more active role, starting with the students themselves: to be aware of and involved in the challenges that students undertake is an essential condition to optimize the support offered to them. Moreover, we must recognize the role of the class group as a support agent. Besides the coordinated action of those involved in support (co-teaching), joint action must be well planned, away from the standardized situation of a teacher leading the class while support sits next to the student with difficulties. Likewise, family collaboration is very important, and the administration should overcome the subordinate vision of family participation. We know that efforts made to involve families in support are those that provide the most profitable results from the point of view of the student's progression.

This article identifies actions to improve educational support policies that could help reduce the worrying ESL percentages. To do this we have used three axes of analysis of high conceptual value that allow the theory and the practices present in the school to be linked: attribution, strategies and support agents. This analysis can contribute to change the generalised understanding of educational support among policymakers as well as education and social agents.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). [AQ2](#)

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