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Deficits in the Socio-Educational School Inclusion Strategy for Students with Social Difficulty in Spain during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Students with administrative care measures have historically faced difficulties in achieving school goals. The Covid-19 pandemic forced the declaration of a lockdown, which accelerated changes in the schools' pedagogical actions. This investigation analyses the strategies used by the educational system to promote the academic inclusion of students who have an open protection file in the child welfare system within the context of Covid-19. Two different phases are compared: Phase 1) from the March lockdown to the end of the 2019/20 school year; Phase 2) The first six weeks of the beginning of the 2020/21 school year. Longitudinal follow-ups were carried out with adolescents in care with a sample of $N = 10$ (Phase 1) and $N = 11$ (Phase 2). Based on the grounded theory, information is supplemented by case studies through interviews with educational professionals, $N = 14$ (Phase 1) and $N = 11$ (Phase 2). The results indicate deficits of schools' adaptability to the situation of the students suffering social exclusion and difficulties in monitoring when students do not attend school in person and do school activities at home. It is concluded that the design of the educational policy applied in the context of the pandemic does not take the social factor into account.

Keywords: child welfare, social exclusion, disadvantaged schools, educational opportunities, Covid-19, inclusion

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Primanjkljaji v strategiji vključevanja socialnoizobraževalnih šol za srednješolce s socialnimi težavami v Španiji med pandemijo covida-19

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☞ Srednješolci, deležni ukrepov administrativne oskrbe, so se že v preteklosti srečavali s težavami glede doseganja učnih ciljev. Pandemija covida-19 je povzročila razglasitev zaustavitve javnega življenja, kar je pospešilo spremembe v pedagoškem delovanju šol. Ta raziskava analizira strategije, ki so jih uporabili izobraževalni sistemi, za spodbujanje akademskega vključevanja adolescentov, ki imajo odprt status varovanja v sistemu varstva otrok znotraj konteksta covida-19. Pri tem primerjamo dve različni fazi, in sicer: fazo 1) od marčevskega zaprtja do konca šolskega leta 2019/20; fazo 2) prvih šest tednov začetka šolskega leta 2020/21. Longitudinalna nadaljnja spremljanja so bila izvedena z mladostniki v oskrbi z vzorcem $N = 10$ (faza 1) in $N = 11$ (faza 2). Upoštevajoč utemeljeno teorijo, so podatki dopolnjeni s študijami primerov, ki smo jih izvedli prek intervjujev s pedagoškimi strokovnjaki, $N = 14$ (faza 1) in $N = 11$ (faza 2). Izsledki nakazujejo primanjkljaje v zmožnosti šol po prilagajanju na položaj mladostnikov, ki trpijo za socialno izključenostjo, in na težave pri spremljanju, kdaj se ne udeležijo pouka v živo in raje opravijo zadolžitve doma. Ugotavljamo, da načrt izobraževalne politike, ki je bil uporabljen v kontekstu pandemije, ne upošteva socialnega dejavnika.

Ključne besede: varstvo otrok, socialna izključenost, prikrajšane šole, možnosti izobraževanja, covid-19, vključenost

Introduction

Due to their social vulnerability, adolescents with administrative care measures present specific difficulties that facilitate their school exclusion. These are minors for whom the public administration has to take protective measures to guarantee their right to grow up in an appropriate environment in which their personal needs are met. Their biological families do not provide the support and care that young people need. It is common for these adults to act negligently, so minors do not have the family and social support that are available to their peers. Traditionally, such minors have remained invisible in government statistics, so no official data are available on the academic evolution of vulnerable students. However, previous research has indicated that the drop-out rate of this group is a cause for concern (Sebba et al., 2015; Stott, 2013). Adolescents in care achieve a lower level of education than their contemporaries (Casas & Montserrat, 2009; Miguela et al., 2018), presenting as greater school exclusion (Martín et al., 2008).

The NGOs responsible for the care of these adolescents warn of the worrisome situation of this group in the educational system. IGAXES (2018), an organisation responsible for the programme of transition from the protection system to adult life in Galicia, notes in its report that, in 2010–2017, 80% of the protected youth over 16 years of age did not hold the title of Secondary Education (basic education). The data presented are obtained from a large sample of 3,680 youths with an active protection dossier. The data for 2017 indicate that 43.06% were enrolled in the 3rd grade of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) and showed academic delay. Repeating a course is an indicator of educational exclusion (Bolívar & López, 2009). The 'Jóvenes e Inclusión' (Youth and Inclusion Federation (2016), to which key NGOs working in socio-educational accompaniment with adolescents in care in Spain belong, notes that 75% of students with administrative protection measures do not pass their compulsory studies.

The alarming educational situation of this group may be aggravated by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the first lockdown, adolescents in care suffered increased difficulties in the supervision of their academic activity (Fernández-Simo et al., 2020). The educational system has severe deficits in supporting the most vulnerable students. In crises, students at risk of social exclusion suffer the most significant consequences. In this context of widespread uncertainty, the public administration must develop strategies to support vulnerable students.

Over time, the educational system and specialised resources for child-care have blamed each other for the aetiology of this group's high school exclusion (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2016). The situation indicates the appropriateness

of deepening the study of the educational evolution of this group (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2020). The pandemic has increased the urgency of making the school reality of socially challenged youth more visible. Society must know about this population's situation, so it will demand solutions from the public administration. This research was carried out to analyse the mechanisms established in Galicia to meet the needs of students in care within the context of the pandemic.

Method

In March 2020, coinciding with the lockdown, the first phase of a qualitative investigation was initiated, which aimed to analyse the educational system's performance with regard to students in administrative care. The vulnerable young people themselves and the educational teams that manage the resources and accompany the adolescents expressed their perspectives on their schools' performance. Longitudinal follow-ups were carried out using an intentional sample composed of socially vulnerable young people to analyse their situation in detail (Parrilla et al., 2010). The interest of the research during the follow-ups focused on these issues: the school's attention to the specific social difficulties of each case, the teachers' willingness to collaborate with the socio-educational teams of the protection system, the provision of means to carry out virtual activities, and working with students on digital skills.

In the first phase, an intentional sample composed of 11 young people with an average age of 18.3 years was used (Table 1). The youth participating in the study were informed by telephone of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the information obtained, and their verbal consent was requested. The longitudinal follow-ups were carried out over 23 days, starting on March 18, 2020, and ending on April 9, 2020. There were 42 contacts, of which 25 were by telephone and 14 were video calls with WhatsApp. The average number of contacts was 3.8.

In September 2020, a new school year began within the exceptional situation arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Coinciding with the start of the activity of the educational system, the second phase of the study was launched. Phase 2 follow-ups began on September 14 and ended on October 23. The samples in both phases are different because, coinciding with the end of the course (end of Phase 1), some students did not continue in the educational system. Seven of the eleven young people who participated in the first phase continued in Phase 2 (Table 1). Four participants dropped out of the investigation due to changes in their personal situations that precluded their participation. Three participants (2SL12, 2SL13, and 2SL14) were added to the sample. Participants were incorporated to complement the sample and enable comparison with Phase 1. The sample modifications

were made because the team are interested in continuing the investigation, assuming that they are difficulties inherent to longitudinal follow-ups. These modifications are recognised as a limitation of this research. The mean age was 18.4 years. Six are female, and four are male. A total of 26 contacts, 15 telephone calls, and 11 video calls were made; the latter were made via WhatsApp or Skype.

During the follow-ups, the interest of the research focused on the following issues: provision to students of adequate resources (tablets, Wi-Fi, PCs, etc.) for the continuity of their academic activity; teachers' contacts with the students; teacher supervision of the school activities; attention to the specific social difficulties of each case and adaptability to the circumstances; collaboration and relationship of teachers and professionals of the protection system, according to the students' viewpoint.

Table 1

Sample of young participants in the longitudinal follow-ups

Phase	Code	Studies	Gender	Age	Contacts	
					By Phone	By Video call
1	1SL1	1 st MG	Female	18	2	1
	1SL2	2 nd BVT	Female	20	3	1
	1SL3	2 nd BVT	Male	18	2	1
	1SL4	2 nd BVT	Male	18	5	0
	1SL5	3 rd CSE	Female	18	4	0
	1SL6	2 nd HS	Male	18	2	1
	1SL7	2 nd MG	Female	19	1	3
	1SL8	3 rd CSE	Male	18	1	2
	1SL9	2 nd BVT	Female	18	3	0
	1SL10	4 th CSE	Female	18	1	2
	1SL11	4 th CSE	Male	18	1	3
2	2SL1	2 nd MG	Female	19	1	1
	2SL2	1 st MG	Female	20	2	1
	2SL6	1 st HD	Male	18	2	2
	2SL8	4 th CSE	Male	18	1	1
	2SL9	1 st MG	Female	18	2	0
	2SL10	1 st HS	Female	18	1	1
	2SL11	1 st MG	Male	18	1	1
	2SL12	4 th CSE	Female	18	1	2
	2SL13	1 st MG	Male	18	2	1
	2SL14	2 nd HS	Female	19	2	1

Note. Certificate of Secondary Education = CSE; Middle Grade = MG; Higher Degree = HD; Basic Vocational Training = BVT; High school = HS.

The information obtained in the follow-ups was complemented by case studies carried out by the professionals. The research analysed the schools' performance concerning school inclusion through the testimonies of vulnerable students and professionals outside the educational system. Disciplinary barriers are overcome when examining the schools' procedure from the outside. It is not the teachers but, instead, other actors who analyse the educational system's performance. We highlight the desirability of studying the educational phenomenon from the perspective of the other actors involved (Susinos & Parrilla, 2013). The methodological design, typical of the grounded theory, facilitates the performance of semi-structured interviews built on the information obtained in the follow-ups. Two professionals specialised in vulnerable adolescence and external to the research team supervised the categories obtained, both in the follow-ups and the interviews with the educational teams, at each stage of the study, ensuring the reliability of the data analysis.

In Phase 1, the cases were studied with a convenience sample of 14 professionals who had been active in the protection system for a minimum of 12 months (Table 2). The educators accompanied a total of 76 students who were studying during the pandemic: 29 in basic vocational training; 30 in secondary education; 13 in middle grade; 3 in high school; 1 in a higher degree. The average age of the professionals was 35.3 years. Their average specialised working experience was 68.9 months. The interviews were conducted via the Skype computer app between April 13 and 24, 2020. Previously, telephone contact was made, requesting the students' collaboration, informing them about the issues of interest for the investigation and the necessary data.

A sample of 11 professionals was used in the second phase. Three educational professionals who participated in the first phase could not continue the study. The average work experience was 67.5 months. Seven professionals worked in residential resources and four in communities. They accompanied a total of 45 adolescents enrolled in secondary or post-compulsory studies (Table 2). An in-depth interview was conducted via Skype with each professional between October 27 and November 2, 2020.

Table 2
Sample of professionals in the case study

Phases	Resource typology	Code	Students	Age	Gender	Months of work experience
1	Residential	1E1	1 BVT	28	Female	31
			2 CSE			
			1 MD			
		1E2	1 HS	35	Female	63
			1 CSE			
			2 BVT			
		1E3	3 CSE	32	Male	49
		1E4	1 MD	29	Female	86
			1 BVT			
		1E5	3 CSE	34	Female	101
		1E6	2 BVT	42	Male	142
			1 CSE			
		1E7	3 BVT	46	Female	165
			1 MD			
		1E8	3 BVT	41	Female	57
			1 HS			
		1E9	2 MD	40	Female	42
			4 CSE			
	Community	1E10	3 BVT	25	Female	15
			1 CSE			
		1E11	1 MD	31	Female	21
			4 BVT			
		1E12	1 HD	39	Male	72
			1 HS			
			3 MD			
			4 CSE			
		1E13	5 BVT	33	Female	95
			6 CSE			
			3 MD			
		1E14	1 MD	39	Female	26
			5 CSE			
			3 BVT			

Phases	Resource typology	Code	Students	Age	Gender	Months of work experience
2	Residential	2E1	1 BVT	28	Female	31
			2 CSE			
		2E2	1 HS	35	Female	63
			2 SEC			
			3 BVT			
		2E3	2 CSE	32	Male	49
		2E5	3 CSE	34	Female	101
		2E6	1 BVT	42	Male	142
			1 CSE			
		2E7	3 BVT	46	Female	165
			1 HD			
			1 MG			
		2E8	2 BVT	41	Female	57
			1 HS			
			1 MD			
			1 HD			
	Community	2E10	3 BVT	25	Female	15
			1 CSE			
		2E11	1 MD	31	Female	21
			4 BVT			
		2E12	1 HD	39	Male	72
			1 HS			
			2 CSE			
		2E14	2 MD	39	Female	26
			3 CSE			
			1 BVT			

Note. Certificate of Secondary Education = CSE; Middle Degree = MD; Higher Degree = HD; Basic Vocational Training = BVT; High School = HS.

The purpose of the interviews with the professionals was to delve into the following issues: the school's mechanisms to address the social factor in school inclusion processes; which collaboration spaces are available to work in coordination with the teachers; changes in the school dynamics during the start of the course following the situation derived from Covid-19; which activities in digital skills were being carried out with the students and which technical means were provided.

Results

The school does not possess mechanisms of action in the social factor. This deficit made it more likely for students to suffer school exclusion during the lockdown in March, with the same situation continuing in the first few weeks of the start of the new school year. The results indicate that the educational system did not have the resources to meet the demands of students arising from situations of social vulnerability. One professional argued that 'The schools act as if social difficulties have nothing to do with them, and I think that this is even more serious in a situation like the current one' (2E14). 'The youths' social issues are usually not addressed' (2E2), said one educator. »No one asked us if we had any personal problems or if there were any problems in our live [...] the course started normally' (2SL8), said one student. 'I told the history teacher that I didn't have a laptop, and he replied that nowadays everyone has a computer, just like there are mobiles' (1SL8), said a CSE student. In situations like these, the lack of adaptability of the educational system to the diversity of social situations leads to an increase in educational inequalities. Child protection resources seek to remedy the school deficiencies. 'In the centres, we manage with the means that we have, but the students who went home have a more complicated situation' (1E5), said one professional.

Part of the faculty tried to meet the demands of the vulnerable students in the absence of institutional response. A variety of situations conditioned by the teachers' individual predispositions was detected. One young man enrolled in basic vocational training said, 'The teacher helped me get data for the phone, so I could see what is uploaded... When I cannot download things, she calls me, and we do them by phone' (1SL3). One professional of the child welfare system stated that 'Some teachers are flexible and try to adapt to the reality of the students' (1E3). This indicates the presence of teachers' proactive and resolute attitudes when facing their students' situations of social difficulty. In other cases, passive attitudes are detected that foment difficulties in the school integration of the most disadvantaged students. One educator, who works in open media, stated that 'A girl's tutor told me literally that she could not do any more with a teacher who asked for everything to be sent by computer and did not answer the phone.... I don't understand how situations like this are allowed, knowing that the girl doesn't have a computer at home' (1E14).

The collaboration between teachers and professionals of specialised resources is mostly improvised. 'There are no established protocols for doing a conjoint job, so collaboration depends on the teacher's will' (2E1), said one educator. Another professional argued that 'Some teachers do get involved, but

they do so on an individual basis, they frequently do not assume the social problems as their business, and that means that the meetings with us are only to collect information but not to work together' (2E7). The results indicate that collaboration dynamics are limited to punctual information-exchange contacts. In some cases, it is related to the pre-declaration of the lockdown. 'My educator talks to my tutor from time to time and so they know at the centre how I'm doing in class' (1SL10) said a CSE student. 'Before all this, I would talk every so often with the boys' teachers' (1E7), said a professional. The follow-ups indicated that difficulties in establishing a fluid channel of communication with teachers are common. 'I told my educator to talk to the teachers to see how we were doing... they only communicate by email and there are some things we don't understand in the homework' (1SL9), said a basic vocational training student.

The results indicated the absence of an institutional government strategy to support socially challenged students in the context of Covid-19. Adaptability actions respond to specific actions of certain schools or by the faculty. A young student of basic vocational training stated that 'The tutor helps a lot to resolve my doubts by telephone' (1SL2). Another student, from a different school, argued otherwise. 'No one contacts me, and when I call, I can only talk to the principal who tells me to do what they tell me by email' (1SL9), she said. The perspective of neglect of personal needs was confirmed by another participant, commenting, 'No one asked me why I still have received no material whether if I need anything' (2SL8).

Contacts with students in distance-learning periods varied, depending on the teacher's involvement. 'The relationship with the youths depends directly on the teacher. You find some very involved teachers who are very attentive and others who only send instructions' (1E11), stated an educator. 'Some teachers are very sensitive to the youths' needs, but there is no regulated form of acting; instead, it depends on each person and, in our case, most youths were not asked whether they needed anything' (2E10), said another educator. 'The tutor asked me if I needed anything or if I had any problems and is attentive' (2SL13), one student reported.

Table 3

School Inclusion Deficits in Students in Protection within the Context of Covid-19

Category	Course start (Phase 2)		First lockdown (Phase 1)	
	Frequencies		Frequencies	
	Follow-ups	Case studies	Follow-ups	Cases studies
Deficits in pedagogical practice related to the social factor	7	8	9	11
Deficit in collaboration between school and protection system	7	8	10	13
Deficits in support and supervision of academic tasks in distance-learning periods resulting from personal and/or collective confinements	7	8	6	10
Absence of training actions aimed at promoting students' digital competencies.	7	9	10	10
No use of virtual teaching platforms with confined students	6	7	10	10
Non-provision of technical means for conducting school activities during distance-learning periods	5	6	4	6

The improvisation prevailing during the first lockdown continued at the start of the new school year. Students' digital skills were not addressed, and no diagnosis was made of the students' performance level in the new technologies. No mechanisms were established to facilitate technological means to supervise distance-learning teaching. The results indicate an absence of planning of the educational system in a context of uncertainty in which confinements at home were recurring. Vulnerable students had the least social support and were, therefore, the most affected by school deficits. "The problem we have is that the youths know how to use the mobile well to relate, but managing programmes like Word or knowing how to use platforms on the internet is something else" (2E5), said one educator. 'No one asked us anything about our computer usage level or offered to give us courses' (2SL11), recalled one student.

The provision of technological means varied by school. 'The teacher called me and asked if I had problems with the internet connection. He told me that if I needed help, he would help me' (1SL6), said a young male high school student. Another student, in this case, a secondary student, stated that 'The teachers upload what you have to do but they don't tell the ones who don't have laptops at home what to do' (1SL11). 'I'm not going to the institute now

because a classmate tested positive, and they told part of the class not to go as a precaution... they didn't give us anything and I have to use the laptop lent to me by the educators' (2SL12), explained a young woman. 'I am very angry that the Consellería de Educación makes press announcements saying that no one is going to be left behind, but then, in practice, nothing is done, the supports are focused on some NGO that facilitates things' (1E13), asserted an educator.

The results indicated that virtual platforms were not operational for distance-learning teaching at the start of the course. In several cases, schools intended to combine class attendance periods with virtual teaching. This situation particularly affected schools where classrooms could not accommodate all the students, ensuring mandatory distancing and safety measures during the pandemic. 'It's a shame that they send the kids home for a week with the idea of giving them virtual lessons and they don't even receive a single hour all day,' (2E3), said one educator. Another professional stated that 'In the first three weeks, they did not teach the youths who were at home and now, some professors do and others do not' (2E8). During the first few days of class, the digital platforms did not work. In the third week after the start of the course, a virtual teaching application was activated for the entire educational system. The results indicate that, at the time of completion of the data collection, some teachers did not teach students who were in the virtual mode.

Discussion

The study results indicate that the educational system did not design effective strategies to improve the adaptability of teaching activity to the students' social situation derived from Covid-19. No dynamics were established to promote school inclusion of socially vulnerable students. In the opinion of the authors of the present paper, school inclusion is a process that ensures that all students, without discrimination due to their social situation, have access to a quality school education. To make school inclusion real, the government must establish support mechanisms. The specific needs of the collective do not obtain institutional attention because of inadequate adaptability to their specific reality (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2018). In the socio-educational accompaniment of vulnerable adolescence, it is necessary to consider the contextual factors (De Valenzuela et al., 2018; Santana-Vega et al., 2018). Social conditions affect each adolescent's opportunities, even determining how much time they have to achieve their goals (De-Juanas et al., 2020), including those of the academic itinerary.

Coordination between schools and resources of the child welfare system is essential to minimise the consequences of Covid-19, which increase the

difficulties of school inclusion of students in care (Fuentes et al., 2020). The social and family circumstances of this group of young people hinder the application of remote teaching methodologies. Socially disadvantaged students do not have the environmental conditions in their homes that make distance-learning teaching feasible (Murillo & Duk, 2020). The results indicate deficits in the availability of technical means as well as in the management of digital skills. Students have the technology (mainly smartphones) but do not have the necessary means to follow a distance-learning academic activity (Rodicio-García et al., 2020). Vulnerable adolescents are used to using internet and telephone services as a relational medium (Álvarez-Sigüenza, 2019; Cobo & Narodowski, 2020), but they lack abilities in the management of programmes, files, or printing (Jiménez et al., 2016). The training aimed at increasing students' digital competence, which is carried out during the first weeks of the course, is anecdotal or punctual. There is no comprehensive training strategy that is applied throughout the educational system. The difficulty of managing the technological media, detected during the unexpected confinement of March 2020, was not addressed when starting the new school year.

The results indicate that the administration leaves it up to the schools to provide laptops and tablets, which reflects different situations depending on the reality of each school. The government does not guarantee that all students will have the same opportunities. The possibilities of each centre affect the options given to students during periods of non-virtual teaching. Severe deficits are detected in the supervision of the virtual educational activity of students in care. The findings coincide with recent reports on the increase in school exclusion due to the social factor in the context of the pandemic (Consejo Escolar del Estado (State School Council), 2020; Save the Children, 2020).

The possibility of a new lockdown and the lack of information increase participants' uncertainty about which strategies educational administration will follow to overcome its improvisation during the first lockdown. The absence of action mechanisms hinders the school inclusion of students with greater social vulnerability, as the ineffectiveness of the educational institution conditions this group's academic evolution (Portela et al., 2019). Professionals in the protection system emphasise that the opportunity for shared socio-educational action is in the hands of each teacher's voluntarism. Whether or not a student is accompanied by teachers who are sensitive to the social dimension is a question of luck. The right to equitable education is not addressed from a system perspective.

The results indicate that the school is passive toward socio-educational needs. Achieving school inclusion requires the schools to implement proactive dynamics. The school's commitment to the social dimension facilitates

overcoming contextual difficulties. A school involved in the socio-educational dimension will promote the most vulnerable students' achievement of goals. The pandemic has increased school inclusion difficulties arising from the social factor. The situation is particularly worrisome in periods of non-present teaching in which teachers have trouble maintaining communication with vulnerable students (Bermello, 2020). Crises affect socially challenged groups more harshly due to the historical absence of a socio-educational perspective in school.

The educational system should activate mechanisms for intervention in social issues in order to provide a more effective response when ensuring a fair model. These needs were already present before the onset of Covid-19. School strategies to support socially challenged families, which are exacerbated by the pandemic, continue to be implemented (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). During the lockdown, no support resources were established for families to manage family difficulties and dynamics effectively (Orte et al., 2020). Implementing socio-educational accompaniment would alleviate situations of vulnerability (Amorós-Martí et al., 2016).

Conclusions

The education system has deficits in its attention to the needs of students cared for by the child welfare system. The lack of mechanisms to meet students' needs makes it difficult to reduce the indicators of school exclusion in this group. The situation is exacerbated in crisis contexts resulting from the emergence of Covid-19. Students in care suffer from the lack of mechanisms from the school responding to their specific needs. The public administration should support an educational model that assumes equity as a preferred objective. Passing academic goals is essential for students without support in their natural context. These young people need to reach training levels that facilitate their future working lives. Without work, they will not achieve the essential economic resources for independent living. If school inclusion is not facilitated, they will not be able to overcome the social exclusion situation that gave rise to the protection file.

The school should assume its social responsibility for students from the child welfare system. It plays a key role in the path of social justice. The permanence of school practices that perpetuate the students' situation of social exclusion is currently being tolerated. Activating strategies to respond to the social dimension will help to reduce the processes of exclusion of students in care. The outstanding challenge is to apply, in the coming courses, socio-educational perspectives for the management of the educational system. The public

administration cannot continue to refuse to assume the need for a change in the educational model. All students have the right to receive the same opportunities to advance in their educational itinerary.

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