

The subsidised education as a factor of educational inequality: a situated approach from school choice in A Coruña, Spain

La educación concertada como factor de desigualdad educativa: una mirada situada desde la elección escolar en A Coruña, España

A educação subvencionada como fator de desigualdade educacional: um olhar situado a partir da escolha escolar na Corunha, Espanha

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Abstract

This research analyzes the role of subsidized education as a factor of educational inequality in the municipality of A Coruña, Spain, within the dual public–subsidized system. From a sociological and territorial perspective, it examines how school choice, influenced by families' economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, reinforces processes of social and territorial segmentation. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining surveys of 400 families with children in primary education and semi-structured interviews with professionals from public and subsidized schools. Statistical and discourse analysis reveal a significant association between school ownership and socioeconomic profile, with subsidized schools concentrating middle and upper-middle-class students, showing greater geographical mobility and access to extended services. Factors such as proximity, school zoning, the range of complementary activities, religious ideology, and differential information strategies shape an active choice pattern for more affluent families, as opposed to choices conditioned by proximity and availability for less advantaged sectors. The results confirm that, far from correcting inequalities, the subsidized model reproduces them through symbolic, territorial, and economic mechanisms, reinforcing the internal homogeneity of schools and segmenting the education system. The need for redistributive policies and equitable territorial planning to ensure real equality of opportunity is discussed.

Keywords: subsidized education, educational inequality, school choice, socio-educational segregation, educational policies.

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza el papel de la educación concertada como factor de desigualdad educativa en el municipio de A Coruña, España, en el marco del sistema dual público–concertado. Desde una perspectiva sociológica y territorial, se examina cómo la elección escolar, influida por el capital económico, cultural y simbólico de las familias, refuerza procesos de segmentación social y territorial. Se adopta un enfoque metodológico mixto, combinando encuestas a 400 familias con hijos/as en Educación Primaria y entrevistas semiestructuradas a profesionales de centros públicos y concertados. El análisis estadístico y discursivo revela una asociación significativa entre titularidad del centro y perfil socioeconómico, con la concertada concentrando alumnado de clases medias y medias-altas, y mostrando mayor movilidad geográfica y acceso a servicios ampliados. Factores como la proximidad, la zonificación escolar, la oferta de actividades complementarias, el ideario religioso y las estrategias informativas diferenciales configuran un patrón de elección activa para familias con más recursos, frente a elecciones condicionadas por la cercanía y disponibilidad para los sectores menos favorecidos. Los resultados confirman que, lejos de corregir desigualdades, el modelo concertado las reproduce mediante mecanismos simbólicos, territoriales y económicos, reforzando la homogeneidad interna de los centros y segmentando el sistema educativo. Se discute la necesidad de políticas redistributivas y de planificación territorial equitativa que garanticen una igualdad de oportunidades efectiva.

Palabras clave: educación concertada, desigualdad educativa, elección escolar, segregación socioeducativa, políticas educativas.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa analisa o papel da educação subvencionada como fator de desigualdade educacional no município da Corunha, Espanha, no âmbito do sistema dual público–subvencionado. A partir de uma perspectiva sociológica e territorial, examina-se como a escolha da escola, influenciada pelo capital econômico, cultural e simbólico das famílias, reforça processos de segmentação social e territorial. Adotou-se uma abordagem metodológica mista, combinando inquéritos a 400 famílias com filhos/as no ensino primário e entrevistas semiestructuradas com profissionais de escolas públicas e subvencionadas. A análise estatística e discursiva revela uma associação significativa entre a titularidade da escola e o perfil socioeconômico, com as escolas subvencionadas concentrando alunos de classes médias e médias-altas, apresentando maior mobilidade geográfica e acesso a serviços ampliados. Fatores como proximidade, zoneamento escolar, oferta de atividades complementares, ideário religioso e estratégias de informação diferenciadas configuram um padrão de escolha ativa para famílias com mais recursos, em contraste com escolhas condicionadas pela proximidade e disponibilidade para os setores menos favorecidos. Os resultados confirmam que, longe de corrigir desigualdades, o modelo subvencionado as reproduz por meio de mecanismos simbólicos, territoriais e econômicos, reforçando a homogeneidade interna das escolas e segmentando o sistema educativo. Discute-se a necessidade de políticas redistributivas e de planejamento territorial equitativo que garantam uma igualdade de oportunidades efetiva.

Palavras-chave: educação subvencionada, desigualdade educacional, escolha escolar, segregação socioeducacional, zoneamento escolar, políticas educativas.

Introduction

The Spanish education system has historically consolidated itself as a model structured around three distinct networks -public, state-subsidized, and private- whose coexistence produces a heterogeneous and often unequal educational landscape. In addition to public schools, which are fully funded and administered by the state, the subsidized network comprises privately owned institutions financed with public funds (Muñoyerro 2022) and predominantly managed by religious organizations. Alongside these, the unsubsidized private sector encompasses diverse educational projects, including denominational schools, elite institutions with high tuition fees, and, in some cases, single-sex schools, configurations that further intensify inequalities in access and social composition. This institutional framework, legally established by Organic Law 8/1985 on the Right to Education (LODE) and subsequently reinforced by Organic Law 2/2006 on Education (LOE) and Organic Law 3/2020, which amends the LOE (LOMLOE), has prompted substantial debate regarding its implications for educational equity and territorial cohesion. Numerous studies argue that the subsidized sector functions as a structural mechanism of social differentiation by enabling selection practices that reinforce educational segregation (Soriano, 2015; Roca, 2022).

Similarly, Zancajo, Verger, and Fontdevila (2022) demonstrate that the Spanish subsidized-school model, as shaped over recent decades, is systematically associated with higher levels of school segregation and with the consolidation of distinct educational circuits between the public and subsidized networks.

Within this context, school choice emerges as a social practice conditioned by unequal resources. As highlighted by Bourdieu (2001), Bernstein (2001), and Coleman (1988), family decisions are mediated by economic, cultural, and symbolic capital and operate within a broader logic of social reproduction that privileges certain groups over others. In the case of subsidized schools, symbolic prestige, student homogeneity, and a wide range of services function as key attractors for middle- and upper-middle-class families, whereas families with lower educational or economic capital tend to opt for the public sector, often due to proximity or limited viable alternatives.

A growing body of research, both national and local, has shown how these processes contribute to the segmentation of the school landscape. In A Coruña, Spain—the setting of this study—the geographical distribution of schools aligns with patterns of household income and educational attainment, generating areas of higher and lower demand depending on their social composition (Alegre & Benito, 2012; Gómez, 2024). This dynamic is closely linked to the school zoning model, which, far from guaranteeing equal access, may exacerbate inequality if not accompanied by redistributive

corrective mechanisms (Villa, 2020; Roca, 2022).

Building on this critical perspective, the present study examines the role of the subsidized sector as a driver of educational inequality, focusing on the municipality of A Coruña. The analysis combines quantitative data from surveys administered to families with children in primary education and semi-structured interviews with professionals working at this educational stage. This mixed-methods design allows for triangulation of results, capturing both statistical patterns and the discourses, practices, and meanings underlying family decision-making.

The overarching aim is to analyze how the organization of the public–subsidized system shapes educational equity and how the logic of school choice contributes to the reproduction of social and territorial inequalities. Key factors considered include socioeconomic status, access to information, geographical proximity, religious orientation, and the range of services offered—all of which act as differential determinants in the school selection process. Through this sociological and territorial lens, we seek to contribute to a critical understanding of the education system and to offer insights for rethinking policies that foster equity, social justice, and the effective right to quality education for all.

Legal Framework and Evolution of the State-Subsidized Model in Spain

The current configuration of the Spanish education system is the outcome of a historical process of legislative reforms that have consolidated a dual model based on the coexistence of public and state-subsidized (*concertada*) schools. Although initially conceived as complementary, this structure has generated significant tensions in terms of equity by introducing mechanisms of public funding for privately owned institutions—most of them with a religious orientation—which has ultimately contributed to educational segmentation (Soriano, 2015; Roca, 2022).

The first major transformation occurred with Law 14/1970, of 4 August, the General Law on Education and Financing of the Educational Reform (LGE), which established compulsory and free Basic General Education and, for the first time, defined the typology of schools, distinguishing between public and private. However, it was the LODE that formally introduced the category of state-subsidized schools by allowing certain private institutions to access public funding. Although this model originally aimed to expand educational provision in areas with insufficient public supply, its development has produced structural effects that extend well beyond its initial intentions.

Subsequently, Organic Law 10/2002, of 23 December, on the Quality of Education (LOCE) and, later, the LOE, consolidated the presence of the state-subsidized network, recognizing its role within a mixed system and reaffirming the principle of free compulsory education. With the approval of the LOMLOE, the legal framework incorporates measures intended to strengthen the public sector, although without fundamentally altering the dual structure. The LOMLOE emphasizes that subsidized schools must ensure principles of inclusion, free access, and non-discrimination; however, these objectives are frequently undermined by school practices that generate exclusionary effects, as noted by Roca (2022),

Villa (2020), and Cuartero Cobo (2023).

The current legal framework seeks to balance two competing principles: freedom of school choice, recognized in Article 27 of the Spanish Constitution, and the need to ensure equal opportunities. Nonetheless, numerous studies show that this balance is difficult to sustain in practice. Research by Soriano (2015), Roca (2022), and Cuartero Cobo (2023) documents how certain state-subsidized schools impose indirect barriers to access, such as “voluntary” financial contributions, symbolic requirements linked to the school’s religious ethos, or educational projects configured in exclusionary terms—mechanisms that operate as concealed filters in the admission process.

In this regard, the evolution of the legal framework can be summarized in Table 1, which outlines the key milestones that have shaped the public–subsidized model.

Table 1

Regulatory chronology of the public–subsidised (concerted) school model

YEAR ¹	REGULATION	KEY CONTENT REGARDING THE DUAL MODEL
1970	Law 14/1970, General Education and Financing of the Educational Reform (LGE)	Compulsory and free basic education (EGB); public/private school typology.
1978	Spanish Constitution (Art. 27)	Recognises the right to education, freedom of teaching and freedom to create schools; guarantees free basic education.
1985	Organic Law 8/1985 on the Right to Education (LODE)	Formally introduces concerted schools; public funding for private schools that meet requirements.
2002	Organic Law 10/2002 on the Quality of Education (LOCE)	Strengthens the institutional recognition of the subsidised (concerted) sector.
2006	Organic Law 2/2006 on Education (LOE)	Integrates previous regulations; reaffirms the role of concerted schools as complementary to public schools.

¹ Aunque la Ley General de Educación de 1970 es anterior a la Constitución Española de 1978, es esta última la que establece el marco jurídico superior y los principios fundamentales (art. 27) que condicionan la interpretación y desarrollo de toda la normativa posterior.

2020	Organic Law 3/2020 amending the LOE (LOMLOE)	Strengthens the public network and principles of inclusion and non-discrimination.
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Source: own elaboration.

At the European level, Spain stands out for its high proportion of enrolment in state-subsidized schools, particularly at the primary education stage. According to Turienzo and Manso (2022), only Belgium surpasses this percentage within the European Union. This configuration is especially pronounced in autonomous communities such as Madrid, Navarre, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, where the subsidized sector accounts for more than 40% of the educational offer. In other regions, such as Galicia, the presence of the subsidized network is lower in relative terms, but its impact remains significant, as illustrated by the case of A Coruña, where the distribution of schools reflects and reproduces differentiated social and economic patterns (Gómez, 2024).

From a critical perspective, authors such as Alegre and Benito (2012) have examined how the normative evolution of the subsidized-school model has contributed to shaping a dualized education system, in which differences between public and subsidized schools stem not only from their ownership structures but also from profound divergences in the social composition of their student bodies, the services they offer, and the symbolic capital associated with each sector.

Although the system's regulatory design is formally grounded in principles of equality, it has not been accompanied by effective redistributive policies capable of counteracting processes of selection and social differentiation. As Villa (2020) warns, the absence of robust oversight mechanisms in admission procedures, the leniency shown in monitoring compliance with the principle of free education in subsidized schools, and the weak supervision of public funds have enabled these institutions to operate according to a logic of educational marketization, competing with public schools in terms of prestige and demand. As discussed by Casares & Vidal (2024), this dynamic conflicts with the obligations of free provision, inclusion, and non-discrimination that the regulatory framework of school subsidies explicitly imposes, highlighting the gap between the legal framework and actual schooling practices.

This gap between regulation and practice is further compounded by recent evidence on the role of education policies in generating inequality. Turienzo and Manso (2022) show that certain public policy decisions -particularly those related to the configuration of educational provision and to the criteria for accessing publicly funded schools- can become mechanisms that reproduce socio-educational inequalities by reinforcing student stratification. In a complementary, territorially focused analysis, Turienzo and Manso (2023) demonstrate that the distribution of students between public and subsidized networks varies sharply across autonomous communities, and that these variations are linked to unequal levels of socioeconomic segregation. Both studies underscore that the Spanish subsidized-

school model functions as a space in which public policies interact with family dynamics, consolidating persistent patterns of school segmentation.

Consequently, an analysis of the legal framework of the subsidized model cannot be limited to tracing its legislative milestones but must instead be understood as a structural process that has shaped an institutional architecture conducive to segmentation. Far from being neutral, this regulatory framework has enabled the emergence of institutional and family practices that deepen educational and territorial inequalities—issues that will be further explored in the following sections through the empirical study conducted in the municipality of A Coruña.

State-Subsidized Education and Socio-Educational Segmentation

The Spanish education system, characterized by the coexistence of public and state-subsidized (concertada) networks, has generated extensive debate regarding its effects on equity and social segmentation. State-subsidized education, funded with public resources but managed by private entities, is viewed from various sociological perspectives as a space where pre-existing social inequalities are reproduced and intensified (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 131–165; Bernstein, 2001, pp. 137–168).

Drawing on data from PISA 2022, Torrecilla and Borrueal (2024) confirm that state-subsidized private schools are among the main drivers of socioeconomic segregation in Spain, disproportionately concentrating the most advantaged students while enrolling fewer students in vulnerable situations.

According to Bourdieu (2001, pp. 131–165), the education system operates as a mechanism of social reproduction in which families' cultural and symbolic capital translates into differentiated educational opportunities. State-subsidized schools tend to attract middle- and upper-class students whose families value the symbolic prestige and social homogeneity associated with these institutions, thus fostering selection and exclusion processes that may not always be explicit but that manifest through institutional and social practices. Bernstein (2001, pp. 137–168) complements this perspective by examining how pedagogical discourses and school structures reproduce inequalities through cultural and normative codes that hinder the inclusion of students with lower levels of cultural capital.

Empirically, Alegre, Benito, and González (2008) have shown how school zoning policies contribute to educational segregation by allocating students according to territorial criteria that mirror socioeconomic inequalities. In cities such as A Coruña, this phenomenon results in an unequal distribution of students between public and state-subsidized schools, with marked territorial segmentation aligned with families' socioeconomic and educational levels (Alegre & Benito, 2012; Concello de A Coruña, 2016). This spatial segregation can intensify educational exclusion by concentrating students with fewer resources in certain areas and those with greater opportunities in others.

Cladellas et al. (2013) add that the availability of extracurricular activities and complementary services in state-subsidized schools is another factor that attracts families with greater capital, further reinforcing

segmentation. Colás and Contreras (2013), for their part, highlight the importance of family participation in school governance—a factor typically stronger in the subsidized sector and one closely linked to families' cultural and economic capital—which contributes to maintaining disparities between the two networks.

Studies on the Spanish model consistently point out that, although the current legislation (LOE, 2006; LOMLOE, 2020) establishes principles of free access, inclusion, and non-discrimination, in practice subsidized schools impose covert barriers, such as voluntary financial contributions or religious-based admission criteria, which restrict access for certain groups (Soriano, 2015; Roca, 2022). This reveals an inherent tension within the dual system, which combines freedom of choice with equity requirements, but which often perpetuates dynamics of exclusion and social selection.

From a critical perspective, state-subsidized education not only reflects existing social inequalities but reinforces them through the creation of differentiated educational spaces that reproduce the social and cultural divisions present in society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 65–97; Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 131–165). This process unfolds within a context of globalization and social transformation in which the symbolic capital associated with certain schools acquires strategic value for families (Castells, 2000).

Moreover, educational privatization policies that promote competition between public and private schools reinforce inequality and social segmentation within the education system. This model, grounded in school choice and meritocratic principles, undermines equity and negatively affects cohesion and educational outcomes (Rodríguez, Guzmán & Martín, 2022).

In conclusion, the Spanish state-subsidized model contributes to socio-educational segmentation through symbolic, territorial, and economic mechanisms that reinforce social reproduction and hinder territorial and social cohesion. In cities such as A Coruña, these dynamics highlight the need for educational policies that not only guarantee formal equality but also address the structural causes of segregation, promoting inclusion and genuine equity in access to quality education for all (Alegre, Benito & González, 2008; Villa, 2020).

In this same vein, Rodríguez-Martínez, Guzmán, and Martín-Alonso (2024) emphasize that education policies inspired by market-oriented logics often translate into internal practices of standardization and stratification within schools, increasing the likelihood that the state-subsidized sector will consolidate advantageous positions for specific social groups.

Territorialization of Inequality: School Access and Zoning

The territorial distribution of schools not only reflects pre-existing social inequalities but also contributes to their consolidation. In the municipality of A Coruña, school zoning -understood as the mechanism that determines priority access to schools based on family residence- emerges as a key device in shaping educational access and, consequently, in reproducing or mitigating social inequality.

Territorial analysis shows that A Coruña, despite its small geographical size (37.8 km²), has a high population density (6,511.8 inhabitants/km²), which increases pressure on the educational network and accentuates differences between neighbourhoods. These differences are not merely demographic but primarily socioeconomic: while districts such as 03 (A Grela, Os Mallos, Sagrada Familia) register an average gross household income of €71,746, others such as 06 (Eirís, A Pasaxe, Monelos) do not reach €35,000 (National Statistics Institute [INE], 2022). This disparity directly affects the educational opportunities available to families.

In this context, school zoning may operate as an ambivalent mechanism. While it is presented as a planning tool intended to organize access equitably, its implementation can reinforce segregation when assigned zones coincide with socioeconomically homogeneous territories. Although designed to ensure fairness in access, such an arrangement may consolidate existing inequalities by overlapping with territorial disparities.

Recent studies in other Spanish urban contexts point in the same direction. Iglesias-Pascual, Merchán, and Benassi (2025) show that, in the city of Seville, the spatial distribution of the state-subsidized sector reproduces neighbourhood-level inequalities, reinforcing segmentation between schools according to the socioeconomic profile of their surroundings.

Moreover, educational provision is not evenly distributed across districts. Some, such as Monte Alto or Cidade Vella, have up to six public schools, while others have only two and exhibit a greater presence of state-subsidized schools (Concello da Coruña, 2016). Of the 50 primary schools registered in A Coruña, 27 are public and 23 state-subsidized. Although this proportion may appear balanced, its meaning becomes clear only when examined in relation to their geographic location and the social profile of their student populations.

This spatial configuration encourages dynamics of concealed selection. Families with greater cultural and economic capital tend to reside in areas with a higher density of subsidized schools, which grants them greater capacity to choose within the district. Families with fewer resources, by contrast, are more constrained by geographical proximity as their only viable criterion. This contrast becomes more pronounced when distinguishing between “active choosers” (informed families with higher education levels and mobility) and “conventional choosers,” who prioritize proximity and safety due to limited resources or information (Gómez, 2024).

Furthermore, current legislation (LOE and LOMLOE) assigns substantial weight to proximity in admission processes when places are insufficient. Although in principle this criterion should promote equity, in practice it can become a factor of segregation if not accompanied by fair territorial planning. As Gómez (2024) and Soriano (2015) warn, zoning operates as a “black box,” as its application is not clearly regulated nor is its underlying logic transparent.

Multiple studies corroborate this ambivalence. Villa (2020), for example, demonstrated that expanding

school choice increased segregation, while zoning based on proximity reduced it. Similarly, Alegre, Benito, and González (2008) found that when only one school is assigned to a zone, segmentation is reinforced; conversely, areas with diverse school types may foster inclusion.

Ultimately, the analysis of A Coruña reveals how the territorialization of school access can consolidate inequalities unless structural conditions are addressed. Zoning, far from being a neutral tool, responds to a social and political logic that must be critically reviewed from the perspective of spatial justice. In the absence of effective redistributive mechanisms and equitable planning, the current system risks reinforcing the socio-educational segmentation that shapes the city.

School Choice as a Social Practice (Through the Lens of Habitus)

School choice cannot be understood as a purely individual or neutral decision. Research in the sociology of education has shown that this practice is deeply influenced by families' social position, by the type and volume of capital they possess, and by the dispositions incorporated throughout their life trajectories—that is, their habitus (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 169–222). This perspective makes it possible to analyse how educational decisions reflect, reproduce, and even deepen structural inequalities.

From this standpoint, the education system operates as a space of social reproduction in which families mobilize their economic, cultural, and symbolic resources to maintain or improve their social position (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 169–222; Bernstein, 2001, pp. 137–168). Middle- and upper-class families, endowed with greater cultural and relational capital, tend to use school choice as a strategy of distinction. Their decisions rely both on their interpretation of pedagogical discourses and on the symbolic value attributed to particular schools—often state-subsidized institutions—perceived as homogeneous, demanding, and socially selective (Soriano, 2015; Roca, 2022).

In contrast, families with fewer cultural and economic resources usually make choices conditioned by proximity, tradition, or availability of places, prioritizing accessibility over pedagogical considerations. This differentiation produces patterns of concealed school segmentation, where each type of family occupies a distinct educational space, not as a consequence of abstract free choice, but of their real capacity to exercise that choice (Soriano, 2015).

Gómez (2024) develops this argument by identifying two profiles of choosers: “active” choosers, who plan school selection in advance, handle information about the system, and are willing to travel if necessary; and “conventional” choosers, who adjust their decisions to the immediate environment and their available resources. This classification shows that freedom of choice is not exercised equally across social groups; it is mediated by structural inequalities that shape the schooling experience from the outset. Similar findings emerge in other quasi-market systems. In a study conducted in Milan, Cordini (2024) demonstrates that upper-middle-class families deploy complex strategies of information seeking and mobility to access schools perceived as advantageous, while households with fewer resources tend to limit their choice to the nearest school or to options they know directly.

Symbolic capital, in this context, is expressed through a school's reputation, the social composition of its student body, its educational ethos, and its academic record. As Coleman (1988) argues, homogeneous social networks generate trust, cohesion, and indirect advantages, leading many families to seek environments that mirror their own sociocultural profile. This logic of homophily, present throughout the schooling process, reinforces stratification between schools and contributes to socially closed educational environments. Recent studies on "school profiling" strengthen this conclusion: Zwier (2024) shows that the public construction of a school's image helps sort students by socioeconomic level, attracting families differently according to their resources and expectations.

Likewise, Alegre, Benito, and González (2008) analyse how zoning policies, although designed to regulate access based on proximity, ultimately enable families with greater resources to "choose by opting out of the zone" and to access schools they consider more advantageous. In this sense, zoning does not correct inequality; it may legitimize it if not accompanied by redistributive mechanisms.

All of this is compounded by the lack of transparency in admission criteria in some state-subsidized schools, which can function as mechanisms of indirect social selection. Economic contributions, symbolic requirements, or educational projects ideologically aligned with particular social groups may operate as undeclared filters that restrict access for certain families (Roca, 2022; Villa, 2020).

In sum, school choice is a structured social practice in which family habitus and the unequal distribution of capitals shape differentiated trajectories. This segmentation is neither accidental nor marginal: it is embedded in the structural functioning of the dual education system, where freedom of choice, far from mitigating inequalities, tends to reproduce them under the guise of institutional neutrality.

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach with a sociological and interpretative orientation, structured through a concurrent design with data triangulation (Zapparoli, 2003; Ugalde & Balbastre, 2013). This framework enables an examination of the public–state-subsidized duality as a central structure in educational segmentation, integrating statistical patterns and institutional discourses to provide a situated understanding of the phenomenon in the municipality of A Coruña.

In the quantitative component, we designed a structured survey addressed to families with children in Primary Education, collecting information on school ownership, geographical proximity, parents' educational level and income, religiosity, access to services, and information channels. Sampling was stratified by school ownership, ensuring proportional representation of the three educational networks. Data collection combined face-to-face and digital formats, ensuring voluntary participation and anonymity in accordance with Organic Law 3/2018, of 5 December, on the Protection of Personal Data and the guarantee of digital rights (LOPDGDD), and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 27 April 2016 (GDPR).

For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from

public and state-subsidized schools: teachers, management teams, and non-teaching staff. The selection of this group of informants was based on two considerations: (1) although Soriano (2015) recommended interviewing families from each social class within each school type, this study opted to capture the internal institutional perspective, incorporating expert knowledge on admission dynamics, social composition, and family strategies observed in daily practice; and (2) family perceptions were obtained extensively and representatively through the survey, while the qualitative interviews provided a deeper analysis of institutional functioning and its interaction with family profiles. This design enabled us to triangulate information, linking institutional narratives with statistical patterns and situating the interpretation within a critical framework of school segmentation.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential testing, including contingency tables and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). ANOVA was applied with a significance level of 1% ($p < 0.01$), ensuring the robustness of the findings, based on a sample size of $n = 400$ and an absolute error of 4.9%. Qualitative analysis was conducted through inductive thematic coding (Conde, 2010), identifying discursive regularities related to prestige, social segmentation, student composition, and family strategies in school choice.

The research design follows a descriptive–interpretative strategy with a critical sociological orientation, grounded in a concurrent mixed-methods design with methodological triangulation. The overarching aim is to analyse how the structure of the education system -particularly the public-state-subsidized duality- affects school equity and how the logic of school choice contributes to reinforcing social and territorial inequalities.

The study was conducted in the municipality of A Coruña, a context characterized by high urban density, social heterogeneity, and a significant presence of the state-subsidized network. The variables and methodological approach build on previous research carried out in the same city by Soriano (2015) and Roca (2022), allowing the findings to be contrasted with analogous studies within the same territorial and social framework.

On the quantitative level, the survey was administered to a stratified random sample based on school ownership (public, state-subsidized, private), ensuring proportional representation of each educational network. The variables included indicators of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, as well as measures of geographical proximity and access to information. Table 2 presents the distribution of the sample according to school ownership, reflecting the structure of the school system in the municipality of A Coruña.

Table 2

Sample design by type of school

STRATUM	PROPORTION (Ni/N)	SAMPLE SIZE (Ni)
Students in public education	0,550	220
Students in subsidised (concerted) education	0,350	140
Students in private education	0,100	40
Total	1,000	400

Source: own elaboration based on IGE data.

In the qualitative component, the semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals from public and state-subsidized schools provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from within the institution, capturing direct experiences regarding social composition, admission practices, and interactions with families. Table 3 presents the technical details of the interviewees, including their role, school of origin, and interview date.

Table 3

Technical data sheet of the people interviewed

CODE	ROLE	SCHOOL	DATE
School custodian – Public school	School custodian	CEIP Manuel Murguía	30/03/2025
Teacher 1 – Public school	Teacher	CEIP Emilia Pardo Bazán	04/04/2025
Teacher 2 – Public school	Teacher	CEIP San Pedro de Visma	08/04/2025
Teacher 3 – Subsidised school	Teacher	CPR Plurilingüe Compañía de María	09/04/2025
Teacher 4 – Subsidised school	Teacher	CPR Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús	09/04/2025
Teacher 5 – Subsidised school	Teacher	CPR Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús	09/04/2025

Principal 1 – Subsidised school	Principal	CPR Colegio Calasanz PP. Escolapios	10/04/2025
Teacher 6 – Subsidised school	Teacher	CPR Plurilingüe Calasancias	10/04/2025
Principal 2 – Subsidised school	Principal	CPR Hogar de Santa Margarita	07/04/2025
Principal 3 – Subsidised school	Principal	CPR Colegio Calasancias	09/04/2025

Source: own elaboration.

The combination of both techniques, integrated within a single analytical framework, enables a comprehensive and situated interpretation of school choice in A Coruña, revealing how families' resources, dispositions, and constraints interact with institutional structures to produce -or contain- processes of socio-educational segmentation.

Results

The presentation of results is organized around five analytical axes derived from the objectives and theoretical framework: socioeconomic profile and school type, geographical proximity and zoning, services and work–family balance, religious ethos and symbolic capital, and information and active choice strategies. The findings stem from the integration of quantitative survey data and qualitative testimonies from professionals, allowing for a situated interpretation of how the public–state-subsidized duality contributes to school segmentation in A Coruña.

School Type and Social Segmentation

One of the study's main findings is the significant association between school ownership and families' socioeconomic profiles. The data show that 67.13% of families with monthly incomes between €2,000 and €3,000 enrol their children in public schools, whereas 64.4% of those who opt for the state-subsidized network fall within income levels above €3,000. In the case of private schools, 29.17% of families hold postgraduate degrees, compared with 0.00% among those with only basic education.

This relationship between economic capital and school network choice is confirmed when crossing school ownership with families' educational levels and income (Table 2), where a differential distribution becomes evident: the public sector concentrates families with medium–low incomes and middle or higher educational attainment; the state-subsidized sector predominantly groups middle-class families with secondary and university studies; and the private sector is associated with high incomes and a greater presence of postgraduate qualifications.

Table 4

School ownership by educational level and household income

		PUBLIC	PRIVATE	SUBSIDISE D	CHI-SQUARE AND SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL	
What is your highest level of education completed?	No formal education	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	43,31	<,001
	Basic education	50,00%	3,13%	46,88%		
	Secondary education	57,02%	2,75%	41,23%		
	University education	56,59%	8,79%	34,62%		
	Postgraduate studies	50,00%	29,17%	20,83%		
Please indicate the monthly household income bracket	Less than 1,000 euros	46,15%	7,69%	46,15%	51,92	<,001
	Between 1,000 and 2,000 euros	63,89%	0,00%	36,11%		
	Between 2,000 and 3,000 euros	67,13%	6,99%	25,87%		
	More than 3,000 euros	35,38%	22,31%	42,31%		

Source: own elaboration.

These results confirm what Bourdieu (1979, pp. 169–222) and Bernstein (2001, pp. 137–168) proposed regarding the role of cultural and economic capital in social reproduction: school choice reflects and reinforces pre-existing hierarchies. Coleman (1988) adds that homogeneous networks generate social capital that benefits those who share the same profile, increasing the attractiveness of selective environments.

On the qualitative level, several teachers described families in the state-subsidized sector as “more demanding” and with “greater capacity for planning and making demands,” suggesting a habitus oriented toward the optimization of opportunities. One interviewee from this type of school went so far as to state: “Students or clients, call them what you like,” referring to the market logic within education highlighted by Zancajo, A., Bonal, X., & Verger, A. (2014), which directly shapes social composition.

The segmentation observed is not only economic but also symbolic: state-subsidized schools are perceived as homogeneous spaces with a defined school culture, attracting families seeking socially selective and “safe” environments. This pattern reinforces the logic of homophily described by Coleman (1988) and anticipates the territorial and mobility-related differences analysed in the following section.

Geographical Proximity and Territorial Inequality

Distance to the school is one of the factors most valued by families, especially within the public network: 79.40% of public-school students live less than 1 km from their school, compared with 20.00% in the state-subsidized sector and only 0.60% in the private sector. As distance increases, the relative weight of the state-subsidized network grows: among those living more than 10 km from their school, 56.50% attend a subsidized institution, compared with 8.70% in the public sector.

Regarding the importance attributed to proximity in school choice, 66.04% of public-school families report taking it into account, whereas in the state-subsidized network this proportion drops to 31.13%. The private sector exhibits an inverse pattern, with only 2.83% valuing proximity and 40.26% declaring that they do not consider it at all.

Tabla 5

Distribution of students by school ownership, assessment of proximity, and distance from home

		PUBLIC	PRIVATE	SUBSIDISE D	CHI-SQUARE AND SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL	
When choosing	Sí	66,04%	2,83%	31,13%	132,29	<,001
	No	12,99%	40,26%	46,75%		

your child's school, do you take into account the fact that it is close to your home?	NS/NC	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%		
What is the distance between your home and the chosen school?	Less than 1 km	79,40%	0,60%	20,00%	158,72	<,001
	Between 1 and 5 km	49,10%	5,70%	45,10%		
	Between 5 and 10 km	11,90%	50,00%	38,10%		
	More than 10 km	8,70%	50,00%	38,10%		

Source: own elaboration.

These data show that the state-subsidized sector combines a high degree of geographical mobility with an economic profile that allows families to assume such mobility, positioning itself between the strict proximity of the public sector and the selectivity of the private sector. Qualitative testimonies support this interpretation: several teachers from public schools noted that “proximity and school transport make all the difference,” whereas in the state-subsidized sector “it is common to see families crossing half the city.”

This pattern reflects the territorial segmentation of A Coruña, where subsidized schools are located predominantly in medium- to high-income areas, concentrating educational supply and symbolic prestige. School zoning, conceived as a mechanism for equitable planning, operates in practice as a structure that reinforces inequalities. As Gómez (2024) and Villa (2020) warn, without redistributive corrective mechanisms, zoning tends to reproduce territorial hierarchies and consolidate differentiated circuits.

In this sense, the mobility patterns observed confirm what Bourdieu (1979, pp. 169–222) and Bernstein (2001, pp. 137–168) argue about the role of cultural and economic capital in social reproduction: school choice reflects and reinforces pre-existing hierarchies. Moreover, as Coleman (1988) points out, homogeneous networks generate social capital that benefits those who share the same profile, reinforcing the attractiveness of selective environments and contributing to school segmentation.

Services, Work–Family Balance, and Social Reproduction

The availability of school services -canteen, early-morning programmes, transport, and extracurricular activities- is a key factor in school choice, especially among middle- and upper-middle-class families. A total of 45.75% of families identified the canteen as the most valued service, followed by extracurricular activities (19.5%) and early-morning programmes (14%). These data indicate that schools do not merely fulfil an academic function; they also operate as family-organisation spaces, assuming part of the care function within a context of high labour-market rigidity.

Interviews with teachers suggest that the value attributed to these services extends beyond their immediate usefulness and is linked to the capital they help reproduce. As one teacher from a state-subsidized school explained: "Some families want a school that fills the child's entire day with productive things." This logic of time optimization corresponds to the class habitus described by Bourdieu (2001, pp. 131–165) and to the strategies of distinction expressed through the pursuit of complementary educational opportunities.

The data also show that many families in the state-subsidized and private sectors express a strong belief that the school's range of activities and services will play a decisive role in their children's future professional trajectories. This perception aligns with Coleman's (1988) concept of instrumental social capital, insofar as these activities are understood as a pathway to generating long-term competitive advantages—either through the acquisition of specific skills or the creation of social networks.

The quality and variety of the offer are also perceived as differentiating factors between sectors. While public schools provide basic services regulated by the administration, state-subsidized schools design expanded and tailored programmes aimed at a specific family profile, reinforcing their appeal. As a subsidized-school principal acknowledged: "We design our activities as an attractive product that positions us in the city." This approach illustrates the penetration of market logics in education (Ball, 2003), where competition to attract students is presented under the guise of freedom of choice, contributing to the segmentation of the educational system.

This logic is reinforced by recent evidence from Save the Children, which shows that fees, associated expenses, and certain admission criteria in the state-subsidized sector effectively limit access for the most vulnerable students, restricting their real freedom to choose a school (Echazarra, 2024).

Religiosity, Ethos, and Symbolic Capital

It was found that 62.10% of families who identify with a religion enrol their children in the state-subsidized sector, compared with 27.60% who do so in the public sector. Likewise, 64.40% of students who take Religion as a subject are enrolled in state-subsidized schools, indicating that the religious ethos is present not only institutionally but also in curricular practice. These data suggest that, beyond active religious practice, the religious ethos functions as a symbolic filter that attracts families with a particular socio-cultural profile and contributes to the internal homogeneity of these schools.

Interviews with teachers confirm that many families, even if they are not practising believers, choose

state-subsidized schools “for tradition, for values, or for cultural affinity.” This symbolic dimension of choice aligns with Durkheim’s (2002, pp. 68–96) view of the school’s moral and socializing function, understood as a space that reinforces a group’s internal cohesion. At the same time, Roca (2022) warns that the religious ethos can become a mechanism of selective exclusion, limiting internal diversity and reproducing homogeneous social patterns.

In the case of certain religious state-subsidized schools located in high-income areas, this lack of diversity may result in students not being exposed to heterogeneous social realities, thereby affecting their preparation to navigate diverse social and professional contexts. This situation reflects Bourdieu’s (2001, pp. 131–165) argument on social reproduction, whereby school dynamics perpetuate belonging to particular social circles and reinforce symbolic boundaries between groups.

Information, Social Networks, and Active Choice

Families use different channels to gather information about schools: institutional websites and other online searches (29.75%) were the most frequently cited, followed by social media (24%), visits and open days (18.75%), and word of mouth (14.75%). As Bourdieu (2001, pp. 131–165) argues, access to and use of these resources are conditioned by the cultural and digital capital available: families with higher levels of such capital combine multiple sources and develop an active choice process, whereas others rely mainly on face-to-face channels or their immediate environment.

Along these lines, Coleman (1988) notes that networks of trust and recommendation operate as social filters, reinforcing ties among families with similar profiles and fostering homogeneous environments. State-subsidized schools amplify this effect through more intensive communication strategies -constant presence on social media, updated websites, dissemination of activities- while the public sector relies on more limited institutional channels.

As Castells (2000) warns, the ability to access, select, and process information is an unequal resource that, in the school context, not only guides family decisions but also symbolically constructs a school’s prestige. This symbolic construction is, again, linked to what Bourdieu and Passeron (1996, pp. 95–108) describe as social reproduction: differential visibility and access to information reinforce the position of state-subsidized schools in the educational marketplace and contribute to maintaining the social segmentation previously discussed, something that Roca (2022) also identifies in the case of A Coruña.

After analysing separately the dimensions involved in school choice, it becomes pertinent to integrate all the variables into a multivariable model that enables the observation of joint relational patterns.

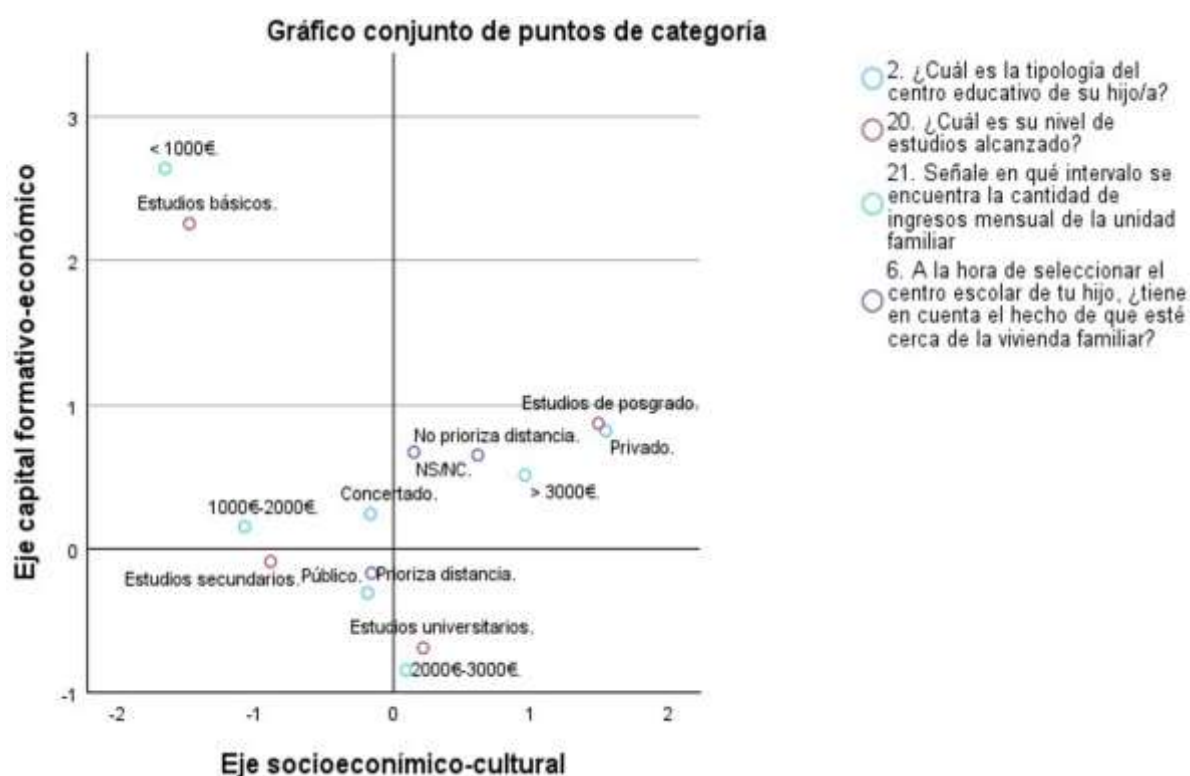
Overall School-Choice Profile: Multiple Correspondence Analysis

Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) allowed us to integrate the main variables involved in school choice -economic, cultural, symbolic, and territorial capital- and represent them within a single factorial space. The first two dimensions of the model explain 14.7% of the variance, which is sufficient to identify

the dominant relationships between family profiles and school networks.

Figure 1

Family profiles and school choice: a multiple correspondence analysis.



Source: own elaboration.

In the graph, the horizontal axis (X) represents socioeconomic–cultural capital, where negative values are associated with lower income and educational levels, and positive values with higher income and elevated educational capital. The vertical axis (Y) captures formative–economic capital, differentiating between profiles with low qualifications and limited economic resources (lower part) and those with high educational attainment and greater economic capacity (upper part). The position of the public-school profile in the lower-left quadrant reflects residential proximity, lower income, and medium–high cultural capital; meanwhile, the state-subsidized profile, located in the central quadrant, combines intermediate economic and cultural resources with active choice strategies and greater

geographical mobility. The private-school profile, in the upper-right quadrant, concentrates the highest capital on both axes, evidencing its more exclusive character.

This configuration confirms Bourdieu's (2001) argument regarding social reproduction: school choices reflect and reinforce structural inequalities, and in the case of the state-subsidized sector, its intermediate position between the public and private sectors enables it to attract families with sufficient resources to exercise strategic choice, though not to the level of economic exclusivity associated with the private sector. Thus, the apparent freedom of choice becomes a mechanism that consolidates differentiated circuits and segments the dual education system.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings allow us to affirm that the study's objectives have been achieved, providing a situated understanding of how the public–state-subsidized duality in A Coruña affects educational equity and how the logic of school choice contributes to reinforcing social and territorial inequalities. The internal coherence of the study rests on the articulation between the theoretical framework -with key references such as Bourdieu (2001), Bernstein (2001), and Coleman (1988)- the mixed-methods design, and the critical interpretation of the results.

From a critical and emancipatory perspective, it becomes evident that state-subsidized education, far from functioning as a compensatory mechanism, operates as a device of social reproduction, indirectly selecting its student body through variables such as economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Roca, 2022). School zoning, rather than correcting inequalities, consolidates them by overlapping with socioeconomically homogeneous territories (Gómez, 2024; Villa, 2020), and expanded services, religious ethos, and communication strategies reinforce internal homogeneity and the symbolic prestige of these schools (Durkheim, 2002; Coleman, 1988).

Among the most relevant contributions, the study demonstrates, based on local empirical evidence, that the state-subsidized sector occupies a strategic intermediate position between the public and private networks, attracting families with sufficient resources to engage in active choice but without reaching the economic exclusivity characteristic of private schooling. It also highlights how school-choice dynamics are shaped by patterns of homophily and territorial segmentation, offering evidence that can inform the rethinking of educational planning and resource redistribution policies.

Nevertheless, the study presents certain limitations. Representativeness is restricted to the municipality of A Coruña, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Moreover, by not conducting direct interviews with families, the study narrows the understanding of the subjective dimension of school choice, although this limitation is partially compensated through quantitative data and the insights provided by school professionals.

Regarding future lines of inquiry, there is fertile ground for inter-municipal comparative studies analysing how zoning policies and control mechanisms over the state-subsidized sector can reduce socio-

educational segregation. However, Fontdevila and Zancajo (2025) show that pro-equity redesigns of educational quasi-markets only produce substantive effects when accompanied by strict regulation of admission processes, funding, and the balanced distribution of vulnerable students across school networks. It would also be pertinent to examine the long-term impact of these dynamics on academic and professional trajectories, in order to assess whether “freedom of choice” contributes to social mobility or perpetuates stratification, as anticipated by Bourdieu (2001) and Coleman (1988).

In sum, the findings invite us to question the current dual model and to design redistributive and spatial-justice-oriented policies that ensure educational equity becomes a real right rather than an unfulfilled promise.

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