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A Theoretical Framework for Formative Equity in Border Educational Contexts

Constructo teórico de equidad formativa situada en contextos educativos fronterizos

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ABSTRACT

The research objective was to develop a theoretical construct of educational equity situated in border educational contexts based on a case study at the Juan Pablo I Educational Institution in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia. A sociocritical paradigm and a qualitative hermeneutic-interpretive approach were adopted, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis with informants including administrators, teachers, students, and families. Triangulation allowed for the identification of six interdependent core elements: situated institutional equality, structural heterogeneity, poorly systematized school transitions, formative assessment between standardization and rigidity, relational justice based on listening, and the border as an active pedagogical condition. It is concluded that situated educational equity requires justified and traceable differentiation without compromising academic rigor.

Descriptors: educational priority zone; access to education; educational policy. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El objetivo de investigación se basó en generar un constructo teórico de equidad formativa situada en contextos educativos fronterizos desde un estudio de caso en la Institución Educativa Juan Pablo I de Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia. Se adoptó un paradigma sociocrítico y un enfoque cualitativo de método hermenéutico-interpretativo, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas, grupos focales y análisis documental con informantes directivos, docentes, estudiantes y familias. La triangulación permitió identificar seis núcleos interdependientes: igualdad institucional situada, heterogeneidad estructural, transiciones escolares poco sistematizadas, evaluación formativa entre norma y rigidez, justicia relacional basada en la escucha, y la frontera como condición pedagógica activa. Se concluye que la equidad formativa situada exige diferenciación justificada y trazable sin renunciar al rigor académico.

Descriptores: zona de prioridad educativa; acceso a la educación; política educacional. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

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Research Articles

INTRODUCTION

In this regard, educational equity is particularly prevalent in border regions because schools receive and process inequalities that do not originate in the classroom but directly affect learning, assessment, and school retention. Similarly, Cúcuta, a city on the border with Venezuela, is a place of migration and cultural change, and interrupted educational trajectories and socio-familial differences are not uniform; therefore, it is not appropriate to apply the same criteria to populations entering the educational system under different circumstances.

Given that a border educational institution seeks to achieve a common standard for a diverse population, we need to understand what is happening in this context and how to stay informed about these developments. We must now distinguish between formal equality, administrative equality, educational equity, and educational justice to put the issue into perspective: formal equality provides the legal basis for rights; administrative equality refers to how procedures, schedules, scales, and responsibilities are carried out; equity seeks to remedy unequal conditions; and educational justice asks whether educational opportunities and recognition are sufficient. According to Connell (1993), curricular justice is not divorced from the conditions under which people learn, and Bourdieu (1997) observed that school rules operate within a context of varying social and cultural capital. In other words, the same rule does not necessarily produce the same effect on students with different backgrounds.

Given that the Juan Pablo I Educational Institution in Cúcuta deals with campuses, schedules, upper grades, and educational trajectories marked by human mobility, changes in residence, academic discontinuity, and cultural change, this case demonstrates the impact of a common standard on a diverse population. But this is not about abandoning academic rigor: it is about recognizing that a requirement lacking situational context can severely penalize the very differences that the school should be supporting. Thus, situational

educational equity does not lead to lower educational quality; rather, it is a tangible opportunity to learn with equal resources, differentiated support, and institutional recognition.

At the same time, studies on inclusion, mobility, and school research have shown that institutions respond differently to mobile or culturally diverse students, especially in systems that lack mechanisms for reception, pedagogical adaptation, and support (Kloetzer et al., 2022; Manzano, 2026; Spanner & Maué, 2022). Similarly, research on contextualized school improvement and educational inclusion has indicated that effective institutional responses are not uniform but rather adaptive and sensitive to schools' demographic profiles (Bellei et al., 2025; Emam, 2026). Thus, from these theoretical perspectives, we can identify the gap we seek to fill: there is no institutional construct that can be used to describe justice, boundary, and situated learning within the same conceptual framework.

Based on the foregoing, the research question is posed as follows: What elements are necessary for the development of a theoretical construct of situated educational equity in border educational contexts, based on a case study at the Juan Pablo I Educational Institution in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia?

In accordance with the above, the research objective was to generate a theoretical construct of situated educational equity in border educational contexts based on a case study at the Juan Pablo I Educational Institution in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia.

METHOD

The study was grounded in the sociocritical paradigm because it viewed the school as a historical and institutional construct characterized by inequality, decision-making, and possibilities for change. Within this paradigm, educational institutions consolidate routines, hierarchies, and meanings, but they also allow actors to evaluate their own practices. In this regard, Habermas (2023) provides the theoretical foundation regarding practical and emancipatory interests, and Freire (1970) identifies dialogue and problematization as necessary conditions for changing educational relationships.

Approach and Method

This was a qualitative approach, as meaning, experience, and institutional documents are at the center of the study, rather than merely statistical data. The method, on the other hand, was hermeneutic-interpretive, aimed at reconstructing the meanings of the participants and institutional texts—not just the predefined ones.

Study Design

The design was based on a case study at the Juan Pablo I Educational Institution, focusing on the main campus, grades 10 and 11, the school schedule, and transitions within the school system. In other words, the case was considered as a situated whole—that is, as a system of relationships among documents, actors, pedagogical practices, assessment, support, and the border context—rather than as a collection of individual interviews. The central focus of the study was situated formative equity, and seven categories were identified from which instruments and open coding were developed, without ruling out the possibility of new categories: institutional equality, institutional heterogeneity, school transitions, educational justice, formative assessment, support, and border context. The dimensions and indicators were translated into qualitative dimensions and indicators that could be verified through documents, interviews, or focus groups as needed.

Techniques and Informants

Semi-structured interviews helped maintain a shared perspective on learning, and the focus groups placed a strong emphasis on personal narratives; as a result, we were able to identify points of agreement, contrasts, and examples that are not always evident when reviewing individual responses. Furthermore, the informants were intentionally selected. Key to this process were administrators with experience in academic or community management; faculty members with prior experience at the main campus or with transition processes; students in the same grade levels who had experienced changes in their school on campus, in their schedule, or in their commute; and parents or guardians with an

understanding of their children's educational journey. As such, the diversity of perspectives was not intended to represent their knowledge in a statistical sense, but rather the type of interpretation of knowledge that is the focus of the different groups of individuals, because each group has a different understanding of equity: administrators from the perspective of regulation, teachers from the perspective of pedagogical mediation, students from the perspective of their educational experience, and families from the perspective of support.

Rigor and Analysis

Expert judgment for instrument validation, triangulation of sources, techniques, and documents, category saturation, auditability of matrices and process records, and interpretive feedback as needed. Divergence among voices was preserved in a way that could be explained by the context of the source itself rather than by the source's institutional position, experience, or context as a whole—rather than through a single interpretation. The analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic approach: document organization, transcription, document review, open coding, grouping by categories, identification of internal disputes, triangulation and interpretation, and construction of the theoretical construct.

Ethical Considerations

From an ethical standpoint, the following were ensured: informed consent, consent from underage students, confidentiality, anonymity of testimonies through the use of codes, use of the information solely for academic purposes, and the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the process.

RESULTS

The triangulation of interviews, focus groups, and institutional documents allowed us to identify six interdependent core elements that, together, underpin the construct of situated educational equity.

Institutional Balance Between the Common Framework and Situated Application

First, school administrators agreed that the SIEE and the Student Conduct Manual play a guiding role, although they noted that the real challenge lies in their ethical interpretation in day-to-day practice. A campus coordinator put it bluntly:

"Institutional equality cannot be understood as the uniform application of the same requirements to all students, but rather as the guarantee that each student has the same opportunities to learn [...] moving from formal equality toward an equity that recognizes true diversity as a value and not as a limitation" (Administrator 4, personal communication, 2026).

However, the faculty's discourse introduced a nuance, as the common standard alone does not lead to the same experience for different cases. Thus, the documentary analysis confirmed that the institution itself is internally differentiated: the technical program coordinated with SENA requires a different minimum grade, students with disabilities have an Individual Plan for Reasonable Accommodations (PIAR), and preschool education is evaluated qualitatively. Therefore, differentiation is integrated into the institutional design and cannot be considered an exception.

Institutional Heterogeneity as a Structural Condition

Second, heterogeneity was not limited to nationality or disability. The data presented in the study showed differences in class sizes, infrastructure, ages, schedules, training patterns, and interaction with teachers across campuses of the same institution. A student who transferred from a small campus to a larger one described the change in these words: "Being on a smaller campus , I felt more welcomed; there were classes of twenty students, and the teachers could give us more attention" (Student 2, personal communication, 2026). A parent also referred to this when comparing his daughter's original campus to the main campus, noting that the professors were no longer as approachable or as well-coordinated.

School Transitions and Insufficiently Systematized Support

Third, transitions between locations and schedules were one of the most consistent findings in the corpus; although the institution has liaison mechanisms, grading platforms, and structured reports for students with special needs, support during regular transitions was not fully structured and depended much more on the individual initiative of the professor or coordinator assigned to the student. One coordinator put it this way: “Support during transitions between locations and schedules is not fully structured as a systematic institutional process [...] it often depends on the individual commitment of each coordinator or teacher” (Executive 4, personal communication, 2026). In other words, one student felt as though she were in charge of the process without help from teachers or support from anyone beyond the occasional assistance from her classmates.

Formative Assessment: Between Planned Remediation and the Experience of Rigidity

Fourth, the SIEE includes a comprehensive system of diagnostic assessment, self-assessment, leveling, and remediation that is standard for continuous learning. But for students and families, it is clear that assessment can become rigid if the procedure is followed without understanding the reasoning behind it. One student explained to me regarding the process that “if you don’t complete the assessments by solving the formula the way the teacher wants, they cancel the assessment and don’t evaluate the processes, even if the processes are correct” (Student 1, personal communication, 2026). However, triangulation did not allow us to attribute rigidity to all teachers or subject areas; thus, the best finding was the diversity among teachers and subjects.

Relational justice grounded in listening

Fifth, educational justice became evident in everyday situations involving active listening, review, and proportionality in treatment. Students and tutors viewed these practices as fair, with the adult explaining and offering an alternative, and they felt that decisions made without justification—such as arbitrary ones or those involving favoritism—were unfair. As one tutor put it: “Just as the teacher has the

right to complain, children also have the right to be heard" (Tutor 4, personal communication, 2026). Thus, pedagogical differentiation is legitimate for the stakeholders when it can be explained and documented, and it is then that a reasonable adjustment does not become an arbitrary privilege.

The Border as an Active Pedagogical Condition

Consequently, the Colombian-Venezuelan border was a source of variation in educational trajectories, enrollment dates, documentation, and cultural references. Administrators reported fluctuating enrollment numbers, absenteeism, and a lack of consolidated academic information, and teachers also mentioned curricular gaps between the educational systems. A Venezuelan student described the culture shock he experienced when he first arrived at the institution: "Arriving there with different customs and ways of speaking really does make a big difference [...] they'll probably look at me strangely because I'm Venezuelan and I'm speaking a different dialect" (Student 1, personal communication, 2026). Similarly, a guardian identified specific documentation-related restrictions on his daughter's access to technical training through SENA, demonstrating that administrative requirements can pose a real challenge and act as a barrier if not accompanied by guidance and validation of prior learning. Triangulation was used to summarize six patterns: there is a common and well-known institutional framework that can be applied in different ways; heterogeneity occurs within the institution itself and not only between nationals and migrants; ordinary transitions are less formalized than cases already covered by specific instruments; assessment involves formative mechanisms influenced by teaching practice; justice involves listening and proportionality, as well as regulatory compliance; and the border is also a cultural, curricular, and administrative condition.

DISCUSSION

We emphasize that institutional documentation itself consists of common rules and differentiated treatment, and the PIAR, specific criteria for technical education, and remedial mechanisms imply that equity is already partially

incorporated into current regulations. The challenge, then, is not to invent new exceptions, but to provide them with institutional conditions that allow them to integrate this differentiation in a coherent and traceable manner. At this stage, Connell's (1993) approach to curricular justice is relevant; a criterion that would be neutral may be unjust if it neglects the circumstances under which students participate in the educational process.

In terms of heterogeneity, the study's second fundamental assumption has been supported by most authors; diversity does not appear to be an exception, but rather an ordinary aspect of frontier schools. This conclusion is in line with Bellei et al. (2025), who argue that school improvement must be a response to specific institutional characteristics, and with Emam (2026), who has demonstrated that teachers' sense of inclusion can vary depending on institutional conditions. It is also important to note that the evidence broadens the initial conception of the border, since the relevant diversity was not only Venezuelan migration but also Colombian students who moved to a different location, repeated a grade, and/or were promoted to a higher grade level.

In contrast, during the transition period, support was the area where the gap between regulation and experience was greatest. Kloetzer et al. (2022) argue that the arrival of mobile students raises institutional questions regarding the welcome, sense of belonging, and continuity, while Spanner and Maué (2022) point out the additional work teachers must undertake when dealing with mobile populations without prior training. In line with these perspectives, Manzano (2026) warns that institutional alignment and academic expectations directly affect educational continuity. The findings of this case study are consistent with these warnings, but differ in that mobility can also occur within the same institution and across locations. This also supports the theoretical relationship between formative assessment and educational justice, according to Kodelja (2021), Ciani et al. (2021), Fine and Furtak (2024), and Asamoah et al. (2025). Assessment can be viewed as a tool for learning or a tool for reproducing inequalities in education, depending on how it is designed and implemented. Based on the evidence we have reviewed, there appears to be a sound framework surrounding

formative assessment that is effective in terms of teacher ownership, institutional coordination, and students' understanding of what we are doing.

The axiological aspect of the reasoning behind active listening is also aligned with educational justice and recognition; perceptions of justice improved when students and families were able to describe a problem and receive a comprehensible response, in line with the theoretical view of recognition and participation as part of school justice. Thus, differentiation was legitimate only when it could be justified, so as not to confuse equity with the discretion of certain teachers and students.

Consequently, regarding the border, Mondaca et al. (2020) warn that border schools can reproduce exclusion if the curriculum ignores the region's cultural diversity, while Mutis et al. (2021) and Guio Rojas and Torres Carvajal (2023) situate Colombian-Venezuelan mobility within the context of rights, documentation, and schooling; the case study results show that the border enters the school through various pathways: different curricular backgrounds, incomplete documentation, and cultural expressions. The border should not be treated as a geographic location but rather as an active pedagogical condition to ensure that admission, grade placement, and the type of remedial instruction are accepted.

CONCLUSION

Our findings support the assertion that educational equity in border education must be framed in terms of six interrelated elements: the common institutional normative condition of situated interpretation, not merely universal interpretation; heterogeneity as a structural condition of the institution, not an exception to migration and, therefore, not merely a matter of migration; systematized support for school transitions (a systematization that currently depends solely on the teacher's intention); formative assessment that should be based on the process rather than on methodology; relational justice grounded in listening, explanation, and proportionality to the matter at hand; and the border as an active pedagogical space that permeates what is taught in school. Taken together, all of this supports

the notion that situated equity is justified, traceable, and institutionally sustained, but this does not mean sacrificing common academic rigor.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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