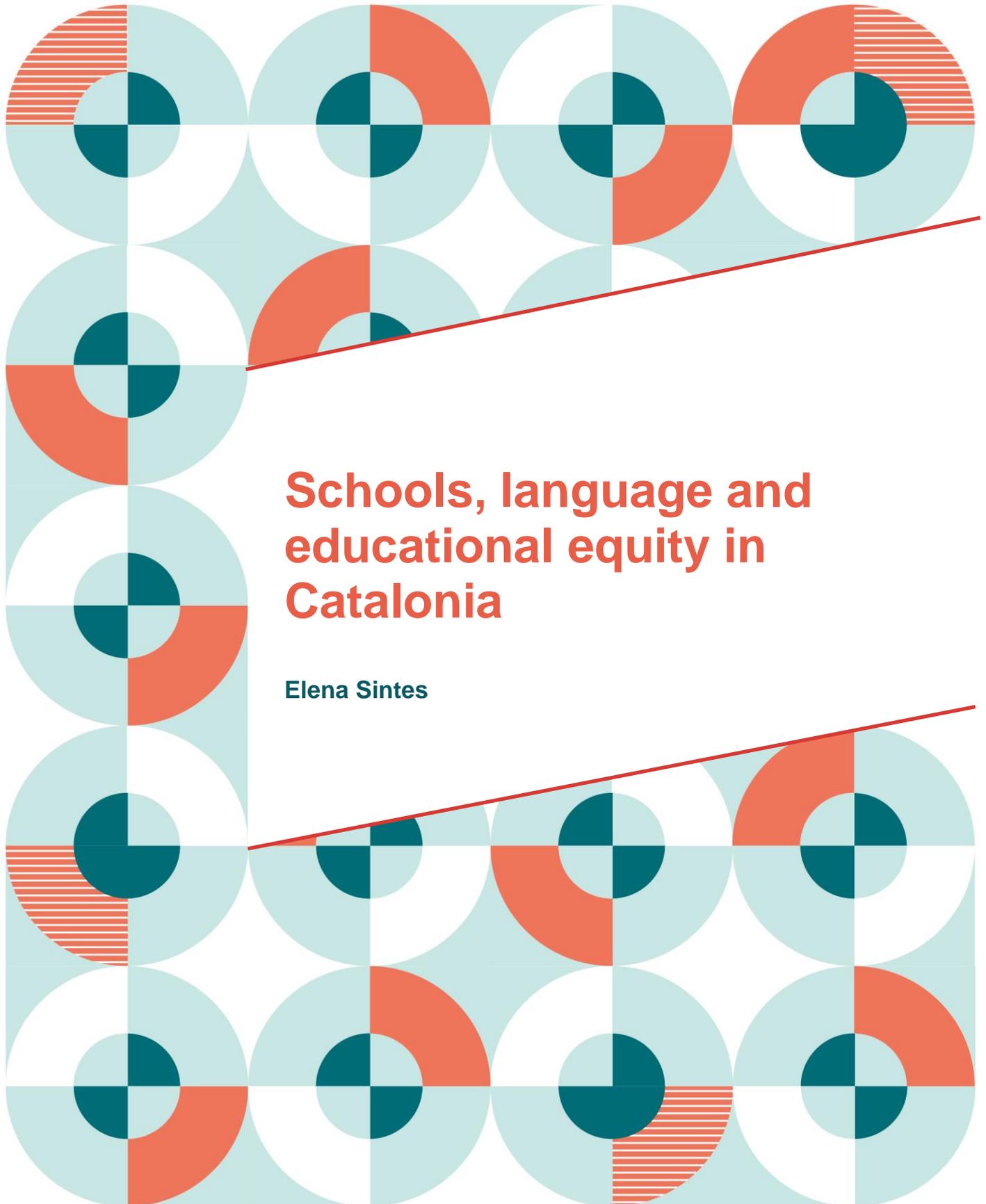
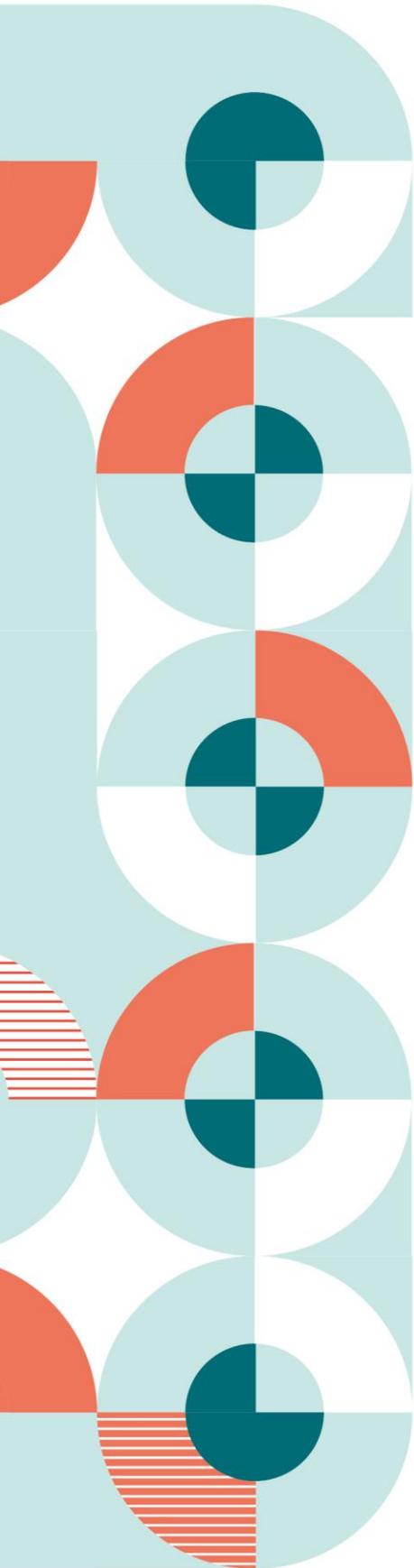


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Schools, language and educational equity in Catalonia

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Document prepared on the occasion of the information visit by 12 Members of the European Parliament Committee on Petitions (PETI) regarding language immersion in educational centers in Catalonia.

One goal of Catalan schools is to ensure students acquire a high competence level in the Catalan and Spanish languages (as well as the Aranese language in Aran), in line with the common framework of reference of the Council of Europe. **The aim is for the entire population is to be able to communicate fully and fluently in Catalan and Spanish.**

To ensure the attainment of these language skills, since the 1980s Catalonia has adopted a unified model, a model of non-separation for reasons of language. That is, **students are not separated in function of origin or family language, with all students together in the same classroom.** This is how the educational system seeks to avoid the division of Catalan society into separate linguistic communities, understanding the model as a fundamental ground for social harmony and cohesion.

Students are not separated in function of origin or family language, with all students together in the same classroom.



Schools as guarantors of equal opportunity in acquiring language skills

To attain high linguistic competence levels amongst the student population, schools facilitate knowledge and skills to the entire student population, regardless of any student's origin. This recognises that **in many cases students would not otherwise be able to acquire such skills, having no access to the Catalan language and no relationship to habitual Catalan speakers in their family or neighbourhood contexts.**

Many children have no other place where to learn and speak Catalan in a habitual, daily manner, other than school.

Due to the minority status of Catalan even today, many children have no other place where to learn and speak Catalan in a habitual, daily manner, other than school. **According to recent data presented by the office of the Ombudsperson [Síndic de Greuges] in Catalonia:**

- 20.9% of adolescents have no active contact with the Catalan language outside of school.
- About 10% of all students have neither Catalan nor Spanish as their family language.

Faced with this unequal starting point, which is the situation for thousands of children and young adults, **the Catalan school system must assume a role as a compensating force, so as to ensure the linguistic skills of the entire student population, regardless of place of origin or immediate environment.**

If we were to deny these students their right to a full set of language skills, we would perpetuate the system's preestablished inequalities and, in consequence, social inequality itself. **Separating students on the basis of place of origin or language would deny them the opportunity to learn together and relate as equals alongside children of other backgrounds, accents or social circumstances,** seriously debilitating equal opportunity on a social, employment and cultural level, while weakening social cohesion.

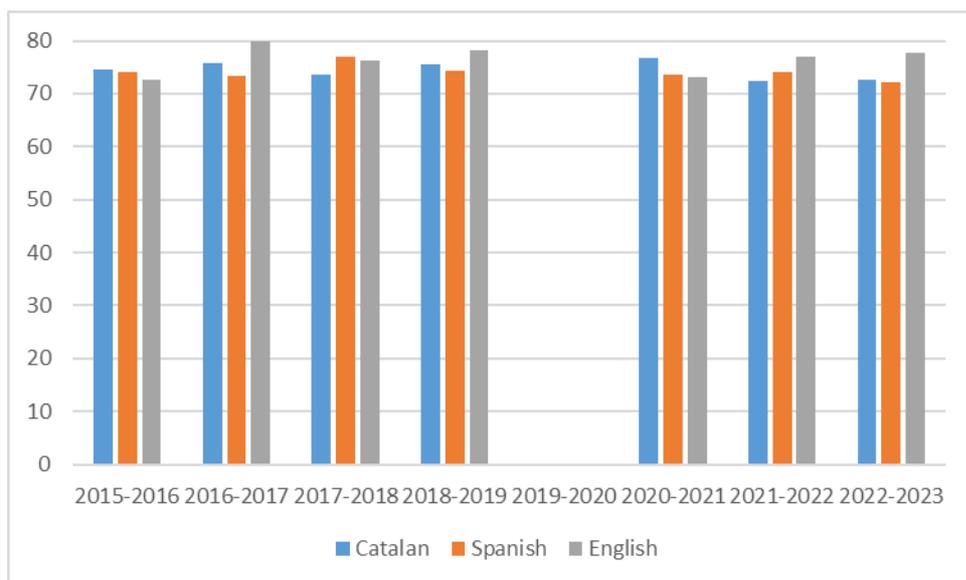


Catalan schools contribute to the reduction of educational inequality in function of place of origin, when learning official languages

Current legislation obliges the educational system to ensure that all students acquire a full skillset in oral and written Catalan and Spanish (and Aranese in Aran). All students are further required to learn a foreign language, regardless of the language spoken at home at the start of their educational process.

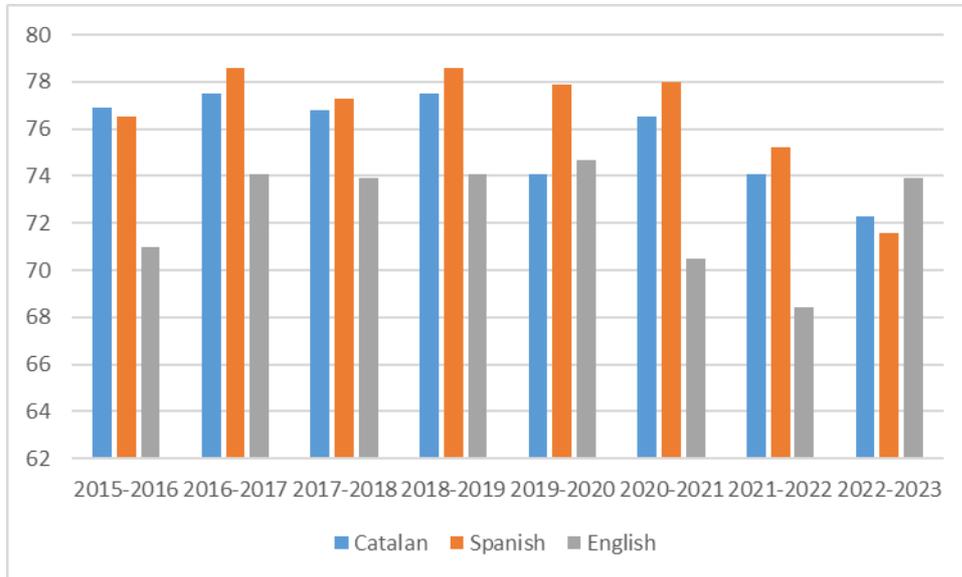
The Key Competences tests carried out for all 6th year of elementary school and 4th year of ESO, Grade 10 secondary school, show that **results in Catalan and Spanish are similar. Indeed, in most tests, the results are slightly better in Spanish than in Catalan.**

Figure 1. Average score on the key competence tests in Catalan, Spanish and English in Grade 6 of elementary school, 2015-2023



Source: CSASE

Figure 2. Average score on the key competence tests in Catalan, Spanish and English, 4th year of ESO (Grade 10) (CSASE, 2015-2023)



Source: CSASE

Knowledge of Catalan is dependent on its central role as the common language in the education system, without negatively affecting knowledge of Spanish

All told, the fact that results are on average satisfactory does not mean that there are no inequalities in accessing knowledge of Catalan, consequently **leading to factors of inequality when guaranteeing the language skills of the entire student population.**

The linguistic reality in educational centres is highly diverse. Catalan is not always, nor everywhere, the dominant language; even less so can it be considered exclusive. According to a study carried out in 2022 by the office of the Ombudsperson in Catalonia, Catalan is the habitual language for 62.1% of elementary schools (with Spanish at 33.1%) and for 60.6% of secondary schools (with Spanish at 32.9%).

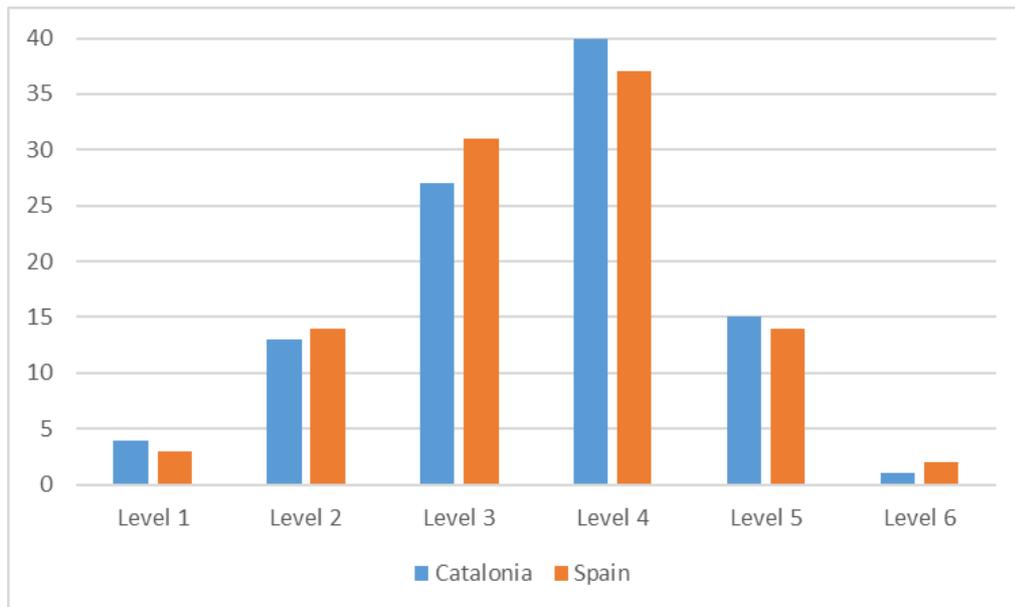
The language model is implemented in a heterogenous manner, adapting itself to the context of each school (especially in function of the characteristics of students and families, along with the teaching staff). In areas where there is a higher social use of Spanish outside of school, **Catalan tends to have a lower incidence as the school's common language, as is the case with the educational districts of Baix Llobregat, Barcelona Comarques and Vallès Occidental**, where the presence of Spanish as the common language at school is above 35%, with just over 25% of teachers using it as their habitual language. In contrast, at schools in the educational territories of Catalunya Central, Lleida and Terres de l'Ebre, where use of Spanish is less frequent, these proportions are below 20%.

Overall, existing studies show that the educational language model assists in raising language competence in **Catalan amongst the Spanish-speaking student population, thus reducing existing inequalities in Catalan linguistic competence in function of initial or habitual language.** Meanwhile, this does not negatively affect Spanish language competence, which is significantly better amongst the overall student population.

All data, whether from the Spanish Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Education of the Government of Catalonia or the PISA study, shows that **Catalan students in primary, secondary and senior secondary school have a skill level in Spanish**

that is equivalent to the Spanish average and above the level of some regions of Spain where Spanish is the sole official language.

Figure 3. Percentage of students in Catalonia and Spain in each Spanish language competence level

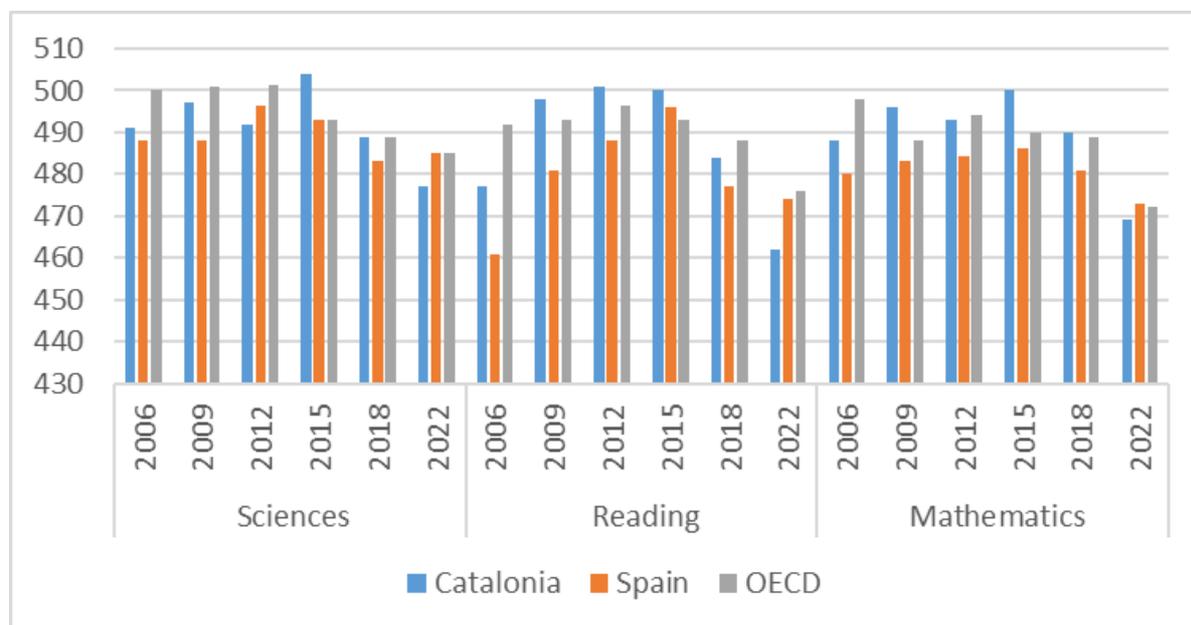


Source: CSASE and Ministry of Education, general diagnostic evaluation, 2009

Language of origin leads to no significant statistical differences in school results

The PISA study shows that **Catalan students have results in mathematical, scientific and reading competence that are similar to Spanish and OECD averages**; in the majority of historical PISA studies, they are above average. If the use of Catalan as the common school language were a factor in increasing inequality, the unified language model would not obtain these results in aggregate comparative terms.

Figure 4. PISA results in Catalonia, Spain and the OECD (2006-2022)



Source: OECD and INE

The comparatively most efficient model in bilingual education for students

In Catalonia, the Valencia Region, the Balearic Islands, Galicia and the Basque Country, different linguistic models are applied at schools. If we compare results obtained by these regions, we see that **the Catalan school model has the best results in terms of competence levels of the overall student population in the language specific to the territory, without negatively affecting Spanish competence levels.**

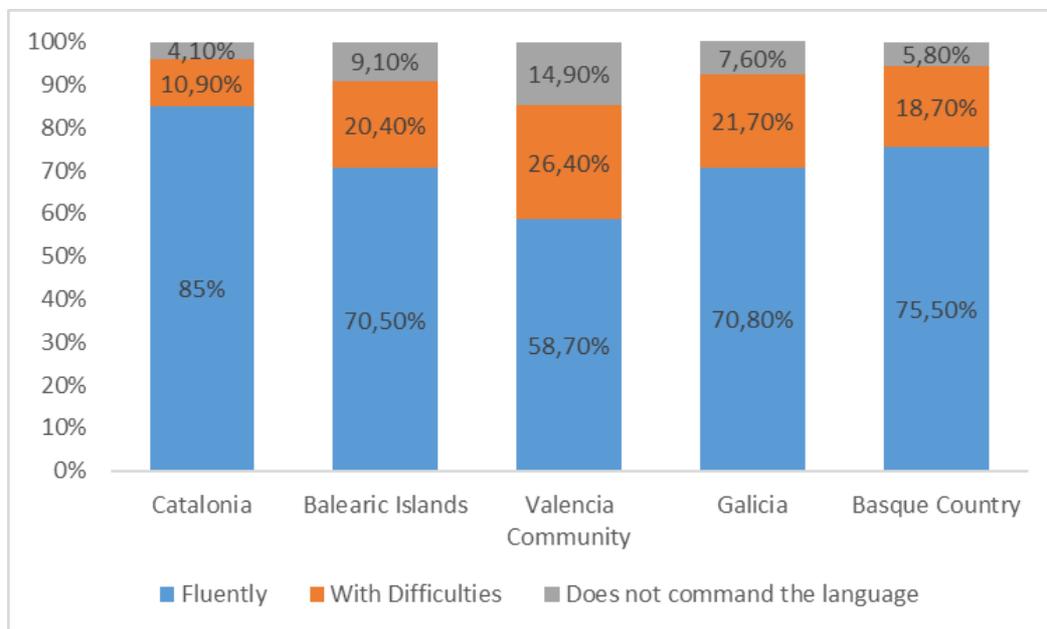
In regions where there is a greater proportion of study hours in Spanish, and as a result a lower proportion of study hours in the language specific to the territory, competence in this latter language drops significantly, especially amongst those students who do not have Catalan, Basque or Galician, given the case, as their habitual language at home or in their social context.

To give an example, only 59% of those under the age of 20 in the Valencia Region have a fluent level in Valencian Catalan. In contrast, results in Spanish competence are not superior in these educational models, despite more school hours being designated for it (in all indicated territories, over 90% of students have a fluent competence level in Spanish).

Therefore, all data demonstrates that, in effect, **lowering school study hours negatively affects knowledge of Catalan amongst the student population, and most especially those students who do not have Catalan as their language at home or in their social context.**

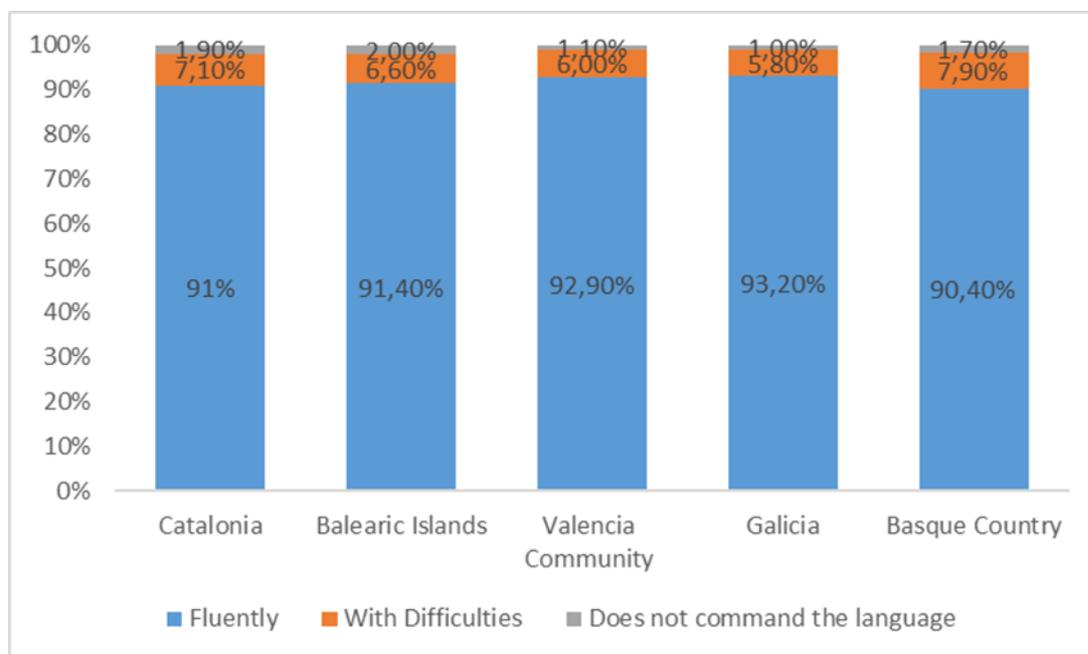


Figure 5. Command of the regional language (Catalan, Basque, Galician) amongst the population under 20 years old, 2021



Source: INE

Figure 6. Command Spanish amongst the population under 20 years old, 2021



Source: INE

Language is not the determinant factor in educational inequality

School performance and educational paths for students depend on multiple economic, social and cultural factors, as well as on the organisation of the educational system itself, including schools and teachers.

The educational system in Catalonia has significant educational inequalities related to the socio-economic and socio-cultural origin of students.

- Socially-advantaged students have an acquisition level of basic skills, including language competence, that is higher than less socially-advantaged students.
- This is demonstrated by the PISA studies themselves, as well as the skills tests annually carried out by the Catalan Higher Council for the Evaluation of the Educational System [Consell Superior d'Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu] (CSASE) for students in their 6th year and 10th year of mandatory education. In the case of the competence tests for 4th of ESO (10th year), for example, students with the highest socioeconomic level obtain 8 points more in Catalan language and Spanish language than students at the lowest socioeconomic level.

Differences in school results are not related to the language of school study but to other factors.

All rigorous studies done to date demonstrate that differences in school results are not related to the language of school study but to other factors: **successive PISA tests (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018 and 2022) provide empirical data on the relationship between family language and results in skills tests in mathematics, science and reading comprehension.**

These studies corroborate that a student's school language and family language do not condition a student's possibilities to attain strong results in reading comprehension, mathematics and science. **The main variables influencing results in skills tests are:**

- The social, economic and cultural index of students
- Foreign origin

- School experiences like repeating a year or changing school
- Educational expectations
- The social composition of the school in question (average ISEC, the socio-economic and cultural index)

Once the negative effects of these socioeconomic and sociocultural variables have been overcome, along with the school context, there are no statistically relevant differences between students from Catalan-speaking families and students from Spanish-speaking families. **In effect, language is not the determining factor in educational inequality.**

Preliminary analysis of the results of PISA 2022 point in a similar direction.

First of all, we can see the clear impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the generalised, dramatic drop in performance for the great majority of countries in the OECD, with a particularly sharp decline in Catalonia. Second, it can be seen that from the 2018 to the 2022 edition of the test, there has been a substantial increase in levels of student vulnerability in Catalonia, which would explain this sudden slide:

- The proportion of students of immigrant origin has increased sharply in the last four years, reaching a total of 24% of the student population. This means that Catalonia has the highest proportion of immigrant students in Spain. This rise is especially due to the increase in the birth rate of children from foreign mothers, which has gone from 13.9% to 22.7% in the last four years.
- There has also been an increase of students with special educational needs (SEN). From the 2018-19 school year to 2021-2022, the number of SEN students in Catalonia rose by 40%, with 51,500 more students with such concerns inside the school system. In the case of socio-economically vulnerable students, the increase is even sharper: there has been a 50% rise, going from 56,505 vulnerable students to 85,196 in just four years.
- This situation has been made worse by the rise in school segregation, which has doubled in the case of students of foreign origin. Catalonia has become, in five years, the territory with the highest degree of segregation in Spain, at a rate well above the European and OECD average. The consequence is that at schools with more vulnerable students, it has become impossible for schools to fulfil their compensatory role.

The Catalan education system can be improved in many aspects, especially with regards to educational inequality and excessive segregation, yet no aspect is related to the language of study

Data available corroborates that since before the pandemic, the Catalan educational system has quite adequately met the goal of ensuring students finish their compulsory education with full competence in Catalan and Spanish, at minimum.

Analysis of these questions also demonstrates that **having Catalan as the common language at school has had positive rather than negative effects**. First, this is because it has not altered the capacity to transmit, teach and learn Spanish. Second, because it has a compensatory function for all students who do not have daily contact with Catalan outside of school.

The presence of Catalan at school ensures social inclusion. Furthermore, for many children and adolescents, school is the only place where they may learn Catalan and experience it with certain normality.

If inequality based on student origin is not compensated, circumstances of social and educational disadvantage will persist. More than ever, the social diversity and complexity faced by Catalan schools requires Catalan to be at the centre of the learning experience, thus upholding its function as a compensatory factor in the face of this broad set of inequalities based on origin and power. In this way it will be possible to ensure that all students will reach a high competence level in both Catalan and Spanish.

Over the last few years, **various studies have demonstrated the advantages of knowledge of Catalan in accessing the job market and finding work, as well as for social mobility**. The presence of Catalan at school ensures social inclusion. Furthermore, for many children and adolescents, school is the only place where they



may learn Catalan and experience it with certain normality, enabling them to feel part of a single society.

There is no question that the Catalan education system can be improved on many levels, especially when it comes to the lack of equity and excess school segregation. In the last twenty years, there have been significant improvements in numbers of students graduating from ESO (Grade 10), a reduction in the rate of those leaving early, and more students in preschool from the ages of 0 to 3. That said, in recent years the rate of improvement seems to have stalled. Data points to causes such as the persistence of educational inequalities related to socio-economic conditions, deficits in education funding and a high level of school segregation.

For many years, the Fundació Jaume Bofill has strived to identify these challenges and point to areas of improvement. In no case has the language used in education been identified as a factor. **So as to ensure a more robust, higher-quality education system, educational policies should direct their efforts towards ameliorating factors related to equity.**

There is a wide margin for improvement, but in the light of data available, this would involve **continuing to ensure an inclusive school model that rejects the separation of students in function of origin and initial language, safeguarding the position of Catalan as a key common language of reference.** The aim is that by the end of the period of mandatory education, all students might achieve full linguistic competence in Catalan and Spanish, as well as functional competence in a foreign language.



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