PARENTIME Public Engagement Strategy

PACE: Policy Advocacy for Childhood Equity – Engaging Stakeholders for Equal Opportunities from the Start

Strategy and Implementation

1.What did I want to achieve? I aimed to **inform and influence policy changes that would enhance social mobility for disadvantaged children, addressing a critical global policy failure**. Despite a 15% increase in education funding by OECD countries over the last decade, children from disadvantaged backgrounds often leave school lacking essential literacy skills, potentially earning 20% less in adulthood than peers from wealthier families ([EUROSTAT, 2022](#)). This disparity has remained relatively unchanged over the past two decades, representing one of the major global policy failures of our time. In light of these challenges, my goal was to use my research findings to develop a **cumulative approach**, **rather than a few tent pole events/efforts**, to build a public engagement strategy that could directly **impact real-world policies** to reduce educational disparities and their long-term economic effects **based on my research findings**.

I designed the strategy **around the outcomes of two distinct research projects** aiming at closing widening gaps during childhood: **Project 1, "Tackling Childhood Inequalities in the Wake of COVID-19: Public Outreach for Policy Change",** used several waves of real-time survey data on parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The findings documented widening inequalities during childhood around this period, and challenged conventional beliefs about the roots of emerging gaps. The research uncovered that income-driven gaps in children's socio-emotional and educational gaps was not the only channel at play. A divergence in parental time devoted to children (with children from the wealthiest families spending 75 more minutes daily on educational activities than those from the poorest), as well as parental labor market uncertainty and well-being, were crucial drivers of childhood inequalities during the COVID crisis, even when household incomes did not change because of the Government's furlough scheme. **Project 2, "Overcoming Literacy Inequalities in Collaboration with Policymakers and NGO's from the onset",** leveraged the differential timing in the deployment of an AI-based Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL) program called DytectiveU across 273 public primary schools in the Region of Madrid (Spain) in order to assess the causal impact on student achievement of the implementation. The CAL program was designed to improve writing and reading skills using artificial intelligence with the ability to simulate students' cognitive processes in order to offer personalized educational content and close widening literacy gaps. Our findings challenged the commonly held assumption that literacy teaching interventions are expensive and teachers' time-intensive by demonstrating that a technology-based approach can deliver personalized instruction autonomously, proving to be both scalable and cost-effective.

Recognizing that building trust with stakeholders to drive policy change is a process that requires time and adaptability, I shaped the **public engagement strategy** to be both flexible and proactive from the start, allowing it to grow and adjust alongside the ongoing research. My **public engagement strategy** encompassed three interrelated initiatives with the following objectives: The **public outreach initiative** aimed to highlight how unequal opportunities in childhood translate into inequalities later in life. This initiative took the form of content dissemination and promoting of discussion targeted to the general public. The objective of the **awareness initiative** was to engage in activities that fostered consultation and exchange with citizen groups to raise awareness on unequal opportunities during childhood, and was targeted to policy makers at regional, national or international level, as well as non-governmental organizations. The aim of the **policy-change initiative** was to influence the design of new policies based on my research findings, which challenged prevailing notions about the underlying channels driving opportunity gaps during childhood.

2.Target audience: From the start I aimed to connect with and influence a **broad spectrum of stakeholders**, including **teachers, parents, children,** and **policy makers**, as well as the **general public**. To that end my research team, collaborators, and I extensively presented our findings in **public outreach events**, and undertook a concerted **publication** and **media campaign**. We also strove to create **platforms for continuous dialogue with NGOs and policymakers**, using findings from the ERC PARENTIME project to translate awareness and dialogue into action. These public engagement efforts directly informed and led to the adoption of national policies aimed at leveling children's playing field so that they can reach their full potential, securing productivity and growth for future generations.

3.Resources used: The implementation of my public engagement activities was sourced from a combination of **financial support**, **institutional backing**, **collaborative networks with NGOs, academic collaborators with policy experience**, and **dedicated human resources**. Primarily funded by the EU-ERC Consolidator Grant for "PARENTIME", this financial resource enabled

comprehensive research and widespread public engagement efforts. Institutional backing (LSE Department of Social Policy, LSE Centre for Economic Performance, University College London) offered vital infrastructural support, ensuring research visibility. Collaboration with NGO's (Change Dyslexia), as well as researchers with links to policy (Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) academic team for Project 1, and Professors Ismael Sanz Labrador and Jorge Sainz, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos), significantly enriched our initiatives by making sure I reached relevant policy makers. The contribution of post-doctoral researchers, PhD students, and support staff, was indispensable, driving the organization and execution of our public engagement activities.

4. Tools or channels I used and why: I devised an engagement strategy that employed several channels to maximize impact and cover a broad audience. **Parliamentary consultations** and **meetings with policymakers**, including regional officials, were pivotal in influencing policy directions and fostering dialogue on socioeconomic and educational inequalities in children. These high-level engagements were complemented by **direct interactions with education practitioners** through **workshops and training seminars at schools and Education Ministry Offices**, aiming to translate research into actionable insights for teachers and students. Additionally, the organization and participation in **public outreach events**, such as round tables that brought together stakeholders from the private and political sectors, were instrumental in disseminating our insights and fostering a community-wide conversation. To broaden the reach of our research findings beyond academia, I contributed to writing various non-scientific reports, white papers, policy briefs, and engaging blog posts for well-known media platforms. I also issued press releases for coverage in leading newspapers and media outlets worldwide, and designed communication campaigns that included informative videos.

5. Implementation plan: To effectively influence policy and tackle inequalities in early childhood, I was guided by an overarching vision. I developed three initiatives that naturally evolved to support and strengthen each other, thereby building trust with stakeholders—an essential element for achieving policy change. **Public outreach initiative:** I collaborated with research teams (e.g., IFS) and charities (e.g., Change Dyslexia) to highlight growing childhood inequalities, contributing to non-scientific reports and policy briefs. My work on the potential of AI in education gained attention through national and international media coverage, including outlets like The Guardian, The Economist, BBC, ABC, and El Mundo. **Awareness initiative:** I shared my ERC PARENTIME research findings in various policy and stakeholder forums (Nuffield Foundation, World Bank, Fundacion Ramon Areces, Planeta Group) fostering crucial dialogue with teachers, families, and policy makers. **Policy-change initiative:** through continuous dialogue with policy makers, my research directly influenced educational policy changes, including a £96 million enhancement of the UK's Tuition Fund and a €170 million increase in Spain's National Tutoring Scheme. Furthermore, my work led to the implementation of the DytectiveU AI learning program in Madrid, reaching over 500,000 primary school children.

Award criterion

1. Benefits for me and for my audience: The **benefit of my public engagement efforts for society** were an increased awareness and the implementation of effective policies and interventions to tackle childhood inequalities that **affected entire populations of children and their families in the UK and Spain**. My work with the IFS team on the widening achievement gaps as a result from COVID-19 influenced policies benefiting a generation of children across the UK, Spain, and wider Europe. Similarly, a three-way collaboration between a Charity (Change Dyslexia), the Ministry of Education in Madrid and my research team led to the recent introduction of DytectiveU, benefiting the entire population of primary school children in Madrid. The significant **benefits for our team** included forging trust with stakeholders, which catalyzed further studies into childhood opportunity disparities. For example, I continue to work with Change Dyslexia and policy makers in Madrid. I met again with Luz Rello (Executive Chief of Change Dyslexia) and David Cervera (Director-General, Regional Ministry of Education in Madrid) on November 27th, 2023, to discuss the implementation of a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) to assess the impact of the DytectiveU software on the non-cognitive skills of students struggling with reading and writing. This synergy also bolstered the career advancement of junior researchers by elevating the profile of their work.

2. and 3. Quantitative and qualitative evidence:

Project 1: Tackling Childhood Inequalities in the Wake of COVID-19: Public Outreach for Policy Change: I collaborated with a team of researchers at IFS—the UK's leading independent economics research institute—to implement a strategy of public engagement to bring to light the widening inequalities as a result from COVID-19 as documented in our research. I contributed to **non-scientific reports** to increase awareness about my research findings based on real-time data from 5,000 parents of English children. Our findings challenged the commonly held assumption that simply reopening the school gates would be enough on its own to close the widening educational inequalities that we found. We uncovered drastic changes to parental work lives and increased childcare responsibilities, with significant long-term implications for children's well-being. Based on these findings, our policy briefs suggest enhancing the current 80% wage replacement for employees reducing work hours for

childcare to increase flexibility and reduce gender disparities. We also recommend expanding funding for tutoring and other catch-up strategies, and designing recovery programs that account for the feasibility for families, considering new demands on parental time and changes in labor division between couples ("Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning" (DOI: 10.1920/BN.IFS.2020.BN0288, ISBN: 978-1-912805-78-5); "How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?" (DOI: 10.1920/BN.IFS.2020.BN0290, ISBN: 978-1-912805-80-8); "Trying times: how might the lockdown change time use in families?" (DOI: 10.1920/BN.IFS.2020.BN0284, ISBN: 978-1-912805-74-7); "Inequalities in Children's Experiences of Home Learning during the COVID-19 Lockdown in England" (Fiscal Studies, 41: 653-683); "How did parents' experiences in the labour market shape children's social and emotional development during the pandemic?" (DOI: 10.1920/re.ifs.2023.0267, ISBN: 978-1-80103-138-7); "Parental labour market instability and children's mental health during the pandemic" (DOI: 10.1920/wp.ifs.2023.2123); and "The return to school and catch-up policies" (DOI: 10.1920/BN.IFS.2021.BN0318, ISBN: 978-1-80103-028-1).

These findings were widely picked up by prestigious **national and international media outlets**, putting on the spotlight the significant educational and future earnings impact of lockdowns on disadvantaged children. Examples include: The Guardian (360M unique viewers/month; "Pandemic set back social and emotional growth of children in England, study finds"; Aug. 1st, 2023), the Daily Mail (380M unique viewers/month; "Covid lockdowns had a 'catastrophic' impact on children's social and emotional skills, half of parents say"; Jul. 31st, 2023); The Telegraph (79.7M unique viewers/month; "Lockdown 'harmed emotional development of almost half of children"; Aug. 1st, 2023); The Economist (14M unique viewers/month; "Downturns tend to reduce gender inequality. Not under COVID"; Jun. 4th, 2020); and by the BBC (580M unique viewers/month; "Lost school time could cost pupils £40,000 in earnings"; Feb. 1st 2021). I also intensively engaged in several **public outreach events** that fostered consultation and exchange with citizen groups to raise awareness about how school closures disproportionately impact children from disadvantaged backgrounds and how the division of paid work and household responsibilities between couples influences parental well-being and children's learning and socio-emotional development. For instance, in October 2022, I was invited by Alex Beer (Program Head at the Nuffield Foundation, an influential UK Charity with a mission to advance educational opportunity) to present my research finding on COVID-19's impact on household labor and potential solutions. This outreach event featured a policy panel including national policy makers and educational NGO's representatives: Carey Oppenheim (former chief executive of the Early Intervention Foundation and former Co-Director of the Institute of Public Policy Research), John Penrose MP (for Weston-super-Mare), and Siobhain McDonagh DBE MP (Mitcham and Morden). I also shared the insights from my research on the emerging socio-economic gaps in children's distance learning strategies at a seminar organized by the World Bank and Higher School of Economics (HSE) University on July 26th, 2021. In addition, I contributed to **UK parliamentary written and oral consultations** on COVID-19's uneven impact on vulnerable children, which **led to shift the policy debate** (The House of Commons Education Committee's into "The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services" in May 2020; the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee's on "Employment and COVID-19" in June 2020; the Public Accounts Committee's follow-up on the National Audit Office report into the first lockdown in July 2020; and the Commons Women & Equalities Committee's on the "Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics" in April 2020).

I aimed to extend the knowledge from UK research to European peers, particularly to inform Spain's 2050 Education Strategy. My ERC PARENTIME project highlighted the urgent need for additional support for disadvantaged students affected by COVID-19, advocating for a 300-million-euro national tutoring fund to alleviate the pandemic's educational impact. Together with Professors Ismael Sanz Labrador and Jorge Sainz, I provided targeted information about my findings to multiple audiences through writing **media articles in leading national newspapers** ("Las lagunas educativas que reveló la pandemia: 'Los alumnos son 'youtubers' pero no saben leer bien'", El Mundo, 162.8M unique viewers/month, Aug. 24 2021; "La propuesta para la vuelta al cole de investigadores de EEUU y Reino Unido trasladada a España", ABC, 83M unique viewers/month, Aug. 24, 2020; "Alumnos golpeados en lo académico y con peor salario en el futuro", El Pais, 106M unique viewers/month, Feb. 10, 2021), **blog posts** (featured in Nada es Gratis, with over 40,000 Twitter followers: "La reducción en un 7,7% de la ratio alumnos por clase podría compensar parte del impacto negativo de la COVID-19 en la educación: Maimónides nueve siglos después (II)", Nov.18, 2020; and "Una propuesta para evitar el efecto negativo de los cierres de los centros educativos en el futuro de los jóvenes españoles", Jul. 31, 2020), and being invited to speak at **public outreach events** ("Educación y brecha digital tras la pandemia", Areces Foundation, Feb. 2nd 2020; and, "La ciencia-ficción en Nada es Gratis: ¿Cómo podría ser la educación en España en 2050?", Nada es Gratis Foundation, Jun. 3rd, 2020, chaired by Prof. Antonio Cabrales (Executive Vice President of the European Economic Association and former President of the Spanish Economic Association), Lucas Cortazar (World Bank consultant and educational strategy contributor) and Ainoa Aparicio (University of Turin)).

Formulation of UK and Spanish policies as a result of my public engagement efforts: The UK

Government's incorporated recommendations 2.5. and 3.5. based on our research findings and made by the team's parliamentary consultation to the Education Committee ("The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services", UK House of Commons Education Committee provided the UK Government's Department for Education consultation, May 2020). Recommendation 2.5. stated "The Government should ensure that early years settings are adequately resourced to support children returning after lockdown with gaps in their development, and wellbeing needs" and; 3.5. Recommendation, which stated "The Government should take steps to prevent the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers from widening as a result of the crisis." The UK Government acted upon these recommendations into policy committing an additional £96 million for the 2020/21 academic year through the Tuition Fund to counteract COVID-related educational disruptions (see Written evidence: Action for Children – CIE0146– and Action Tutoring –CIE0215– here: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1834/documents/17976/default/;and "Getting the grades they've earned: COVID-19: the cancellation of exams and 'calculated' grades: Response to the Committee's First Report").

My public outreach initiatives advocating for equal opportunities in education directly contributed to **shaping** the **2021 Spanish Government's Strategic Education Strategy**, aimed at addressing deficiencies within the Spanish educational system. My research on real-time data regarding children's home learning experiences during lockdown was cited in the Spanish Document Strategy "España 2050: Fundamentos y propuestas para una Estrategia Nacional de Largo Plazo," published by the Ministerio de la Presidencia in 2021 (ISBN 978-84-7471-150-9). Similarly, my findings about the need to deploy at least 300M funds for a national tutoring program in order to mitigate the negative educational effects of COVID-19 on the most disadvantaged children prompted Deputy Joan Margall (Republican parliamentary group) to formally request an additional €170M to the National Program for orientation, advancement, and educational enrichment (PROA+) under Article 110 of the Congress of Deputies' Regulations during the 2021 Spanish Budget Congressional Session (available at https://www.congreso.es/docu/pge2021/enmiendas/PRESUPUESTOS_2021_TOMO_10_ENMIEND AS_%203105_A_3437.pdf). This additional funding was approved into the 2021 Spanish Budget (General State Budget Bill for 2021, 121/000035).

Project 2: Overcoming Literacy Gaps in Collaboration with Policymakers and NGO's from the onset: My team and I collaborated with chief executive of Change Dyslexia Charity Luz Rello (European Young Researcher Award, 2013; Princess of Girona Award, 2016; Forbes' 30 under 30, 2017; Newsweek 20 women of the future, 2018) to produce research about how to reduce of literacy gaps in primary school children via the evaluation of an AI-powered pioneering tool (DytectiveU), which had been developed by the charity and had been introduced in 273 primary schools (over 27,000 students) between 2019- 2022 in the region of Madrid. I was invited by Professor Juan F. Jimeno (former Head of the Research Division and current adviser at Banco de España) to publish a policy report showcasing the preliminary findings from our research ("Educational Reinforcement Measures in Literacy: The Case of the Dyslexia Aid Program in the Comunidad de Madrid" (Cuadernos Económicos De Ice. (102): 221-245 - 2021-01-01 (102), doi: 10.32796/cice.2021.102.7317). In my policy brief and the subsequent webinar with policymakers, I emphasized our findings about the marked improvements in language learning among students using the DytectiveU software, attributing this success to the AI technology's efficiency in identifying patterns in students' language errors and challenging pre-existing beliefs about the comparative effectiveness of language and math CAL programs. As part of the dissemination strategy, together with Change Dyslexia and national media outlets, we launched a series of **public outreach initiatives** including a communication campaign through social media engagement, videos, press coverage, blog articles, and television appearances, as well as a **public awareness initiative** via active visits to schools to reach a diverse audience, including teachers, speech therapists, children, parents, and the public in general with the primary goal of using DytectiveU to bridge literacy gaps. Public outreach activities included **videos on Youtube** ("Inteligencia artificial para acabar con la dislexia" by 2018 T3chFest, Mar. 6, 2018, 19,000 views; "La dislexia es una dificultad de aprendizaje, no es una enfermedad" by BBVA, El País, and Change Dyslexia, Jan. 23, 2019, over 1M viewers; "El valor de los errores" TEDxMálaga talk by Luz Rello, Feb. 27, 2019, 23,000 views); and **press and TV engagement** ("Women, young, Spanish and technology leaders", SICN, 765K unique visitors, Jan. 16, 2018; "Cómo detectar y combatir la dislexia jugando", El Confidencial, 90M unique visitors, Dec.14, 2023;"A blog-post "Aprendizaje asistido por ordenador y el rendimiento de los estudiantes: herramientas prometedoras que no sustituyen a los docentes," Nada es Gratis, Oct. 14, 2022). The team also raised awareness about the importance of closing the gaps in literacy skills among children by directly engaging with the private sector, parents, teachers, and practitioners. On March 15th, 2023, members of the research team were invited by Pablo Lara (Director General of Education at Grupo Planeta) to share the findings from our policy brief with the Aulaplaneta Team (digital educational platform of Grupo Planeta, leading Spanish international publishing and media group offering innovative digital resources to transform classroom learning across over 1,500 schools). The team also delivers a 2.5 hour training on DytectiveU to teachers, school heads and other educational practitioners once a year. These training sessions are heavily oversubscribed, with more than 700 attendees and receive very positive feedback ("Dytective is a great initiative. It'll give us the opportunity to reach more people," Alicia Bailey Garrido, speech

therapist; "Enthusiastic about Dytective. The children love it and learn by playing," M.Neus Costa Auguet, headmistress of Els Estanys School (Platja d'Aro, Catalunya); "Thank you Luz for fighting...to make [DytectiveU] available for everyone regardless of their economic situation. This is priceless!!!" Lucía Alcántara López, mother and president of the Dyslexia Association of Cádiz, Spain).

Policy Change: The findings from our research confirming the cost-effectiveness and scalability of DytectiveU, directly influenced a major policy shift that expanded the program's implementation across Madrid's primary schools to bridge literacy gaps. Between April and May 2023, I continued to work with Luz Rello and started further discussions with regional policymaker David Cervera to raise awareness about the benefits of DytectiveU. These collaborative efforts led to the implementation of the program in all primary schools in the region of Madrid 1,246 primary schools, reaching ca. 500.000 primary school students (Ref: [A/SER-007075/2023 (322O-004-23)](#)).

4.Lessons learnt: Two pivotal lessons stand out: **Lesson 1: Building Synergies through Collaboration:** The key takeaway from early and strategic collaborations with teams and experts such as the IFS team, Spanish Economists linked to policy, and Change Dyslexia, was realizing about the vital role of trust in driving policy changes and societal improvements. These partnerships underscored the significance of platforms for enhancing the visibility of research and their effectiveness in initiating impactful projects. Motivated by these insights, I established and now lead the [LSE Women in Social and Public Policy Research Hub (WISPPRH)](#), embodying the lesson that such platforms are essential for meaningful engagement. **Lesson 2: Inspiring and Supporting the Next Generation of Social Scientists:** I learnt that the pathway from academic research to impactful policy changes and societal awareness is a complex journey, underscoring the necessity of nurturing the next wave of social scientists. Early on I understood the importance of mentoring and training of junior staff and developed **training programs** for my team that are now being exported to the **wider research community** including the University of Seville, Royal Economic Society Mentoring Scheme and the University of Nanterre. I also launched and now Chair professional networks to support junior researchers such as the UK Women's Economics Network (UK WEN).

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