



Addressing Educational Inequalities in Europe: Insights from Longitudinal Research

Executive Summary

Educational inequalities persist across Europe, shaping students' academic and life outcomes. In MapIE we conducted a systematic literature review to examine 161 longitudinal studies on educational inequalities among K–12 students in Europe. Key findings reveal that studies focused on the effects of socioeconomic status and measurements of academic outcomes. Further, our results indicate an underrepresentation of studies conducted in Eastern and Southern Europe, and a shortage of research into early education, intersectionality, and effectiveness of intervention studies. Policymakers should support research that addresses these critical gaps.

Background

Despite several efforts, educational inequalities remain deeply embedded in European education systems (Nurse & Melhuish, 2021). These disparities, often among children from different socioeconomic status, migration background, geographical location, gender, and ethnicity, can hinder social mobility and societal cohesion. However, current knowledge about such disparities is fragmented. Longitudinal data are needed to understand how inequality in education develops and to identify effective interventions. However, studies with at least several months between measurement points remain rare.

Method and Data

Scoping Review

- Followed the guidelines outlined by Lely et al. (2023) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Protocols (PRISMA) (Tricco et al., 2018).
- 1472 studies were screened, all published between 1986–2024.

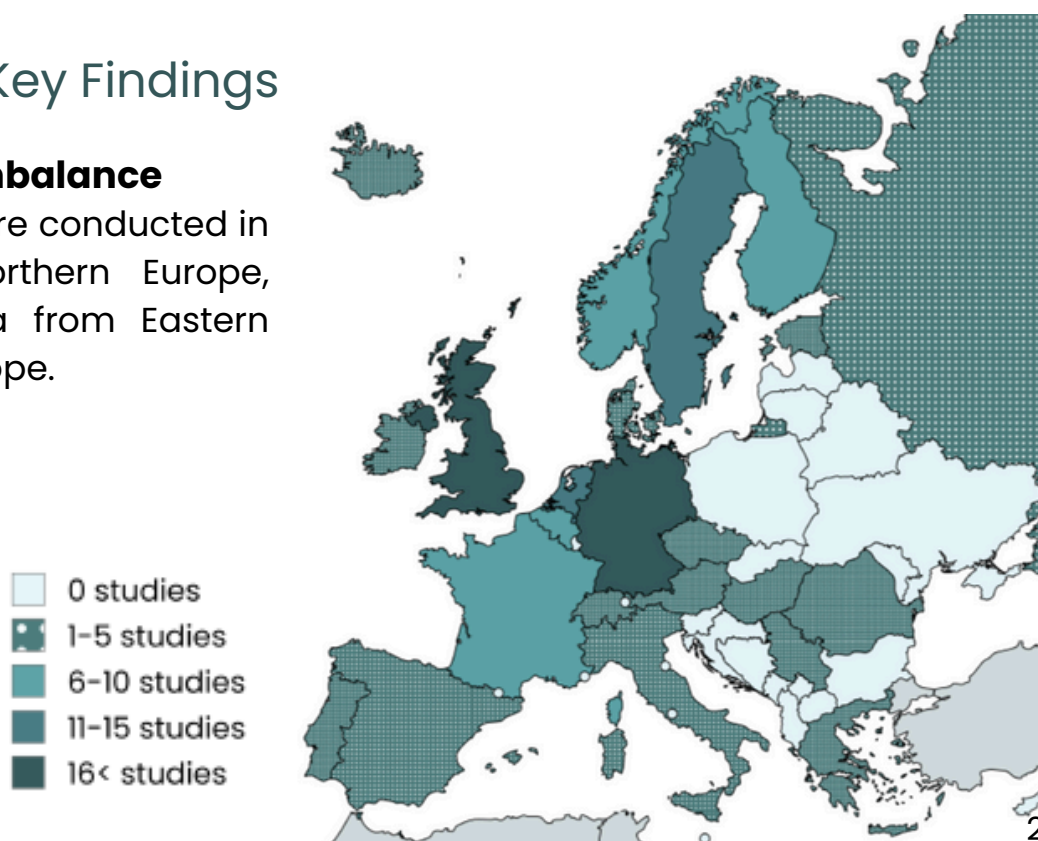
Data

- **161 eligible studies** were included and methodologically evaluated.
- Minimum of 2 measurement points with a minimum of 7 months between them.

Evidence and Key Findings

Geographical Imbalance

85% of studies were conducted in Western and Northern Europe, with limited data from Eastern and Southern Europe.





Main research focus

Research predominantly investigated socioeconomic inequalities and academic performance, with limited attention to socioemotional development or educational attainment.



Methodology

Most studies used data from national panel studies and employed regression-based or structural equation modelling techniques. Strikingly, 20% of the studies did not adequately report sampling methods.

Identified Research Gaps



Geographic Blind Spots

Only about 4% of the studies were conducted in Eastern Europe, highlighting a notable regional imbalance in the research landscape.

Need for Early Childhood Studies

ISCED 0 (pre-primary education) was examined in just 5.3% of studies, despite being a crucial period (e.g. Chetty et al., 2011).

Lack of Intervention Studies

Intervention research made up less than 4% of all reviewed studies, leaving critical gaps in understanding what practices can be effective.

Limited Intersectional Analysis

Studies rarely explored combinations of disadvantages (e.g., socioeconomic status and gender); fewer than 10% addressed more than one inequality simultaneously.

Narrow Outcome Focus

80% of the studies focused on academic performance, while socioemotional skills (8%) and long-term educational attainment (12%) remain understudied.

Findings from longitudinal research suggest that educational inequalities in Europe may influence individual life trajectories and potentially have broader societal implications (e.g. Chmielewski, 2019). When access to quality education is not ensured for all, essential societal functions, such as securing skilled labor, fostering social participation, and promoting innovation, are at risk. Education policies that promote inclusion and equal opportunities are not only a matter of social justice but also of strategic relevance.

Based on our results, we make the following **recommendations**.



Policy Recommendations



Support Research in Understudied Areas

- Prioritize evaluations of targeted interventions and policy reforms.
- Support studies which examine educational inequalities in early development.
- Promote cross-national and intersectional studies: Leverage on the diversity of school systems within Europe, and use it for comparisons (e.g., countries with and without tracking).
- Promote research that includes measures of socioemotional and contextual variables (e.g., family, region).

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Educational inequality is not just a research issue, it is a societal challenge. While longitudinal research efforts have been conducted to understand educational inequalities, there are still several critical blind spots. Targeted policy action informed by existing evidence, strengthened research methodologies, and more inclusive research efforts across all European regions are essential for achieving a more equitable educational future across Europe.

References

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Disclaimer

MapIE is a Horizon Europe-funded research project (2024-2028) involving partners from five Nordic and Central European countries. It responds to the European Union's call for more evidence on how educational inequalities arise and how they can be tackled in different contexts. The project examines both the individual-level factors that contribute to educational inequalities and the policies and practices at school, regional and national levels that seek to reduce them.

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