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This comparative analysis builds on collaborative elements involving all project partners: namely, the analysis is informed by country-level analytical reports on education policy conducted within the framework of Work Package 3 (WP3) (see the table below for participating institutions), with a focus on: 1) how target groups that benefit from projects addressing educational inequality are defined; 2) identifying pioneering policies that promote educational equality, and assessing their outcomes. The comparative analysis was further enriched through the comments and remarks received from partners during the review processes. The author is solely responsible for its content; it does not represent the opinion of

[1] **Type**: Use one of the following codes (in consistence with the Description of the Action):
R: Document, report (excluding the periodic and final reports)
DEM: Demonstrator, pilot, prototype, plan designs
DEC: Websites, patents filing, press and media activities, videos, etc.
OTHER: Software, technical diagram, etc.

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PU: Public, fully open, e.g. web
CO: Confidential, restricted under conditions set out in the Model Grant Agreement
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Table 1: Participating Institutions

Country [Abbreviation]	Project partner(s)
Finland [FI]	Helsingin Yliopisto (UH)
Germany [DE]	Universität Mannheim (UMA) Universität Trier (UT)
Hungary [HU]	TÁRKI Társdalomkutatási Intézet Zrt. (TARKI)
Ireland [IE]	The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)
Lithuania [LT]	Viešosios politikos ir vadybos institutas / Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI)
Luxembourg [LU]	Université du Luxembourg (UL) Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER)
Norway [NO]	Høgskulen på Vestlandet (HVL) Universitetet i Bergen (UiB)
Spain [ES]	Universidad Complutense Madrid (UCM)
Switzerland [CH]	Universität Bern (UBERN)

Abbreviations

ECEC - Early childhood education and care

SES - Socio-economic status

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1 Introduction

Equality in education remains an unaccomplished goal around the world, given that inequalities in education have not only remained substantial, but have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and may prospectively continue to grow (European Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; WIDE, n.d.). Various groups of students experience discrimination during the education process, and these groups are often distinguished by gender, age, level of poverty, disability, ethnicity, indigeneity, language, religion, migration or displacement status, sexual orientation or other characteristics. Undeniably, educational inequalities are a societal challenge that must be tackled, as persistent educational inequalities will have adverse effects on social cohesion, market participation, prosperity and social mobility in European societies and beyond.

Educational inequalities are among the most pressing challenges, both globally and across Europe. Inequalities remain high, both between social categories and among EU Member States (Blaskó et al., 2021). In addition, findings demonstrate that the education system may reproduce existing social inequalities, rather than mitigating these (Hadjar et al., 2018 [LU]), making a better understanding of education policy even more critical. Achieving equitable education is generally the responsibility of educational authorities in EU Member States, and is thus one of the primary tasks of education policy makers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Despite the proven policy importance of this issue, there remains a rather scarce understanding of how educational inequalities and relevant target groups are defined in policy documents in different countries, and how these definitions in public policy documents evolve over time.

By looking at the development of policy concepts over time, we are, in fact, also engaging in an enquiry into policy change. In other words, this analysis is also concerned with understanding how the policy concepts relating to educational inequality change. There is a widely accepted view that policy change is difficult to achieve, due to path dependence – formal institutions and public policies tend to prioritise policy continuity, and hence the actors involved in policy making defend existing models rather than promoting change (Pierson, 2000). Path dependence theories have been challenged by various theories of policy change, which focus on the role of actors, decision-makers, coalitions, ideas and external factors that can influence and achieve significant changes in public policy, including in education policy (e.g., Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; see also Cerna, 2013).

While educational inequalities have been intensively studied through empirical and academic research over the last few decades, gaps still exist in our understanding of how policies to mitigate unequal access to education evolve over time, especially with regard to the identification and definition of vulnerable groups. This comparative analysis looks at educational policy change by examining how the definitions and concepts relating to inequalities change over time, while building on both theories. Path dependence is manifested in the form of the embeddedness of policy concepts, which have deep historical, political and economic roots, as well as ingrained social values and ideas that have a durable effect on how education is perceived; meanwhile, policy change is observable through exogenous factors such as national or international enquiry, and the changing roles of actors, with non-formal education in particular becoming an important player in the field of education.

Low levels of educational inequality have also been treated as indicators of successful education policy, conveying its effectiveness and performance (e.g., Stadelmann-Steffen, 2012: 379). This study thus provides a timely analysis of the evolution of concepts, definitions and the prioritisation of vulnerable groups in educational policy documents from a comparative perspective, which is essential for understanding how policies aimed at mitigating educational inequalities are conceptualised. More specifically, this study analyses questions such as: What is the role of education in addressing inequalities? How are

inequalities conceptualised over time in policy documents? What factors have an impact on identifying vulnerable groups? The present analysis is a product of collaborative efforts by the PIONEERED consortium members listed in Table 1 under 'Acknowledgements', under the guidance of PPMI as the task leader.

To pave the way for a comparative analysis of the evolution of concepts, definitions and the prioritisation of vulnerable groups in public policy documents, the methodology and underlying conceptual assumptions used in this analysis are addressed in the upcoming section.

2 Methodology and conceptual assumptions

This policy brief has been developed within the framework of the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 101004392 (PIONEERED). The main objective of RIA PIONEERED is to determine research-informed policy measures and identify pioneering policies and practices to mitigate inequalities in access to, and the uptake and completion of, education – both in formal and informal educational settings. To this end, researchers from nine participating countries (listed in Table 1) have conducted an analysis of education policy. This analysis focuses on how the meanings of concepts such as educational inequality or vulnerable groups have changed over time in policy discourse, and which aspects of educational inequality have been tackled most successfully over the last decade. Definitions of these concepts are provided in Table 2 below. More detailed analysis and descriptions of these concepts can be found in Deliverable 2.2, 'Methodological guidelines: MILC framework for measuring inequalities and their intersectionalities'.

Table 2: Definitions of concepts

Concept	Definition
Life-course approach	A long-term perspective that integrates different levels of the origins of educational inequalities from childhood to adulthood, and focuses on how to foster equality in education over the course of a person's life.
Intersectionality	Specific inequalities at certain intersections of axes of inequality (e.g., male migrant students).
Vulnerable students	Those groups who do not have the same opportunities (e.g., in terms of education) as other groups in society; vulnerable students tend to be perceived as being 'at risk' of early school leaving and future unemployment.
Formal education*	'Structured education system that runs from primary (and in some countries from nursery) school to university, and includes specialised programmes for vocational, technical and professional training'.
Informal education*	'Lifelong learning process, whereby each individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in [their] own environment and from daily experience'.
Non-formal education*	'Planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum'.
Educational inequalities	Educational inequalities relate to systematic disadvantages for some social groups and the systematic privileges of other social groups with regard to any aspect of education, such as access to educational institutions, learning, achievement (competencies) and attainment (grades, certificates), covering entire educational trajectories. Educational inequalities accumulate over the course of the educational trajectory, and tend to be particularly pronounced at intersections of vulnerabilities.

*Definitions of the Council of Europe (https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions)

Between mid-September 2021 and January 2022, the participating project partners reviewed current and past policy documents and legislation relating to educational inequalities within their respective countries, primarily analysing evidence from the last decade. Policy analysis was based on pre-defined themes and questions, compiled by PPMI and

incorporating partners' feedback. The resulting country reports were particularly attentive to the intersectional inequalities, or lack thereof, referred to in education policies and legislation. They also analysed the definitions of unequal education used over time, identified groups that were targeted by policy interventions, and examined what aspects of inequalities were considered by and prioritised in policy strategies and interventions. The country reports are referenced as sources using country abbreviations in brackets. Where references from the country reports are used, these are listed in parentheses with the relevant country abbreviation in brackets, indicating the original source of the given citation.

The country reports relied on Carol Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) (Bacchi, 2007) approach to analysis, in order to place policy analysis within a wider (historical, political, economic and social) context. The reports deconstruct the policy narrative relating to educational vulnerabilities, while also remaining attentive to the goal of policy analysis. According to this approach, the meaning of educational vulnerabilities and inequalities (the 'problem') is constructed through a policy process aimed at identifying how to define and address issues of educational inequality. Bacchi's approach, supplemented with additional questions, is explorative, and provides a clear framework for analysing both policy formulation and policy implementation, summarised in a six-step process (see Figure 1 below). The present analytical synthesis, with its focus on concepts and definitions, only centres on the former (policy formulation), or the first four steps.

Researchers were asked to conduct a qualitative study primarily analysing policy-relevant documents and answer the questions listed in the figure. The PPMI research team then compared the answers and identified important themes, which helped structure the current paper: we recognised that the understanding of educational inequality was embedded in countries' historical, political, economic and cultural legacies; that dominant views about the role of education were important to highlight for a study on educational inequalities; and that the definition and prioritisation of vulnerable groups changed over time due to various factors. Considering that meaning-making was in the centre of this task, Bacchi's approach was the most suitable for its focus on policy as constructed through a political process and through competing representations of various discourses.

Figure 1: Carol Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach adapted for policy analysis

What's the 'problem' represented to be in key education policy documents?

- How are educational inequalities and other related concepts defined in policy documents?
- What axes of educational inequality, if any, are in focus?
- Are intersectional reasons considered in policy documents as leading causes of educational inequality?
- On which levels of education is unequal access and uptake of education considered?
- Is there an approach formulated for improving access and uptake of education for all groups?

What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

- Is inequality understood differently for different groups, educational stages, and ages of students?
- To what extent is the approach to educational inequality influenced by cultural, political, economic, social, or other assumptions about target groups?
- Which conditions (structural, societal or others) are mentioned as reasons or contexts in which educational inequalities arise?

How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

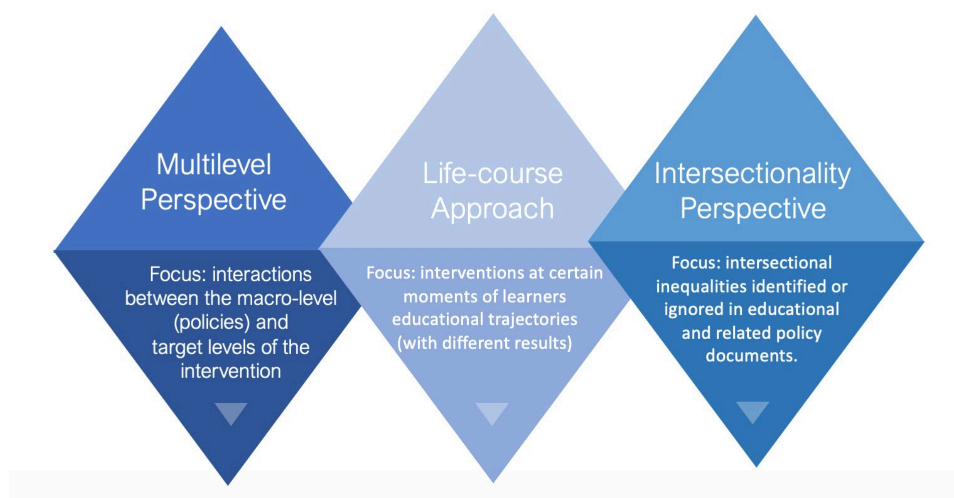
- Are EU-level or international policies, recommendations, conventions named as a frame of reference for policies in the last decade?
- Compared to previous approaches to educational inequalities within the last 10 years, are the current policies different? If so, for what reason?

What is left unproblematized in this problem representation? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

- Are characteristics or contextual factors relevant for understanding vulnerabilities in education left out from policy discourse and policy formulation?

The researchers relied primarily on desk-based research, and in some cases conducted interviews with policy makers to complement their research. After the national reports had been completed, PPMI compiled these country-specific reports into the present comparative analysis, which synthesises the conceptual parts of the national reports, focusing on the evolution of concepts, definitions and the prioritisation of vulnerable groups in policy documents. Considering the wide differences in content between country reports – especially in terms of historical and political contexts, societal challenges relevant for education, as well as differences in legal structures and policy-making – not all countries are referenced in some chapters. The comparative analysis strives to accentuate whether intersectional inequalities are identified in education and related policy documents; whether the life-course approach is considered in policy documents; and whether a multi-level perspective is incorporated into policy documents. With these foci, the analysis is based on the MILC (Multi-level, Intersectionality, and Life-Course) approach, which is attentive to multiple origins, levels and intersections of educational inequality over a life-course perspective (see Figure 2). The MILC approach is also the heuristic model for the PIONEERED project, applied in an open and exploratory manner (for a further description, see Deliverable 2.2).

Figure 2: The MILC approach



This comparative analysis proceeds in the following way: first, the policy context is analysed. This analysis consists of an exploration of policy documents and concepts relating to educational inequality (e.g., equal access to education, vulnerable groups). This section considers the embedded nature of concepts, as well as the role and values inherent in education that define the meanings (in a path-dependent manner) of educational inequalities. In addition, the role of non-formal education is also analysed as an emerging field in education that has demonstrated the potential to change the narratives and meanings of educational inequalities. Second, the evolution of vulnerable students as target groups in education policy is analysed, with a focus on how these groups are constituted in policy documents, and what factors have contributed to changes in the ways in which these groups are defined. Lastly, some implications are highlighted.

The overall aim of this analysis is to shed light on the process of the changes in meaning of educational inequality in selected European countries, as well as to provide a comparative overview of this process. While national contexts are emphasised as important frameworks for the conceptualisation of educational inequality, this analysis goes beyond national particularities and strives to comprehensively describe how definitions of educational inequality and vulnerable groups change in educational policy documents.

3 Policy context: evolution of concepts in policy documents

Summary

- Each of the education systems analysed endeavours to ensure equality in access and opportunities for all in the realm of education, yet the tools and means to achieve this goal vary widely.
- Although states have assumed responsibility for guaranteeing equitable access to education, a growing number of non-state actors are emerging as important players in contributing to mitigating educational inequalities.
- The role of education is usually defined from two perspectives: technocratic (inclined towards satisfying neoliberal or labour market needs) and humanistic (revolving around students' needs and well-being in the process of education).
- Education systems tend to mirror a society's political, economic and social makeup.
- Education has been recognised as a field and tool for integration in nearly all of the countries analysed, highlighting the role of education in mitigating social vulnerabilities.
- Cooperation between formal and informal/non-formal education endorses a better understanding of education in a comprehensive manner.

3.1 Background

All European states have assumed responsibility for guaranteeing equitable access to education, although with substantial differences in the ways in which education policy aims to achieve that goal. In general, differences primarily arise from the ways in which educational inequality is defined, and who the target groups are. In analysing equality in education, a recent study by the European Commission notes:

> *Top-level authorities in nearly all European education systems define or refer to a range of concepts relating to equity in education in their official documents. Apart from equity, the terms used include fairness, equal opportunities, equality/inequality, disadvantage, non-discrimination, vulnerable groups, at risk groups and early school leaving. Whatever terms are used in top-level policy documents, the great majority of European systems have at least one major policy initiative in place to promote equity in education or to support disadvantaged students.* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020)

Indeed, this report aptly indicates the importance of concepts – while equality in education is uniformly a priority for European countries, policy documents define the relevant terms differently. These similarities and differences are at the core of the present analysis.

When examining the evolution of concepts in policy documents, Bourdieu's concept of 'field' is a useful analytical tool for understanding the dynamics that shape educational policies: the 'field' is a relational and hierarchical arena, in which a range of actors (as components of the field) with competitive social positions and unequal powers compete to introduce their demands and shape educational policy (Martín-Criado, 2013 [ES]). Indeed, education policy is a field of autonomy in a continuing 'self-transformation' (e.g., Koller 2010), embedded in (changing) contextual conditions (Bourdieu, 1990; Jobst, 2013). This context is the focus of analysis in this section, which also follows the heuristic model of the overall PIONEERED project.

Given that the education system is of interest to a wide range of social groups and organisations (Archer, 1979 [ES]), educational policies are shaped through multiple discourses and confluence of different actors, particularly under democratic systems. They are

also influenced by contextual factors such as historical, economic, political and cultural conditions. In most countries, these fault lines run along issues such as public and private education, religious and secular education or, broadly, the role of the state in providing equal education (and, consequently, as the corrector of inequalities [ES]). Moreover, each new intervention, provoked by triggers such as new research findings, findings from comparative reports, globalisation or international agreements, is embedded within previous educational structures that are not abruptly eliminated by the implemented change, but rather altered [ES]. Education policy is, then, a complex process that should be understood as both path-dependent *and* continuously evolving.

3.2 Embedded policy concepts

In each of the countries analysed, the definition of educational inequality has evolved over time, strongly reflecting a society's political, economic and social makeup. Research has demonstrated that the meanings of policy concepts and definitions are indeed embedded in various characteristics of society. One notable study is an analysis of the historically embedded guiding principles of education in French educational policy making (Dobbins & Martens, 2012). This highlighted the role of historical and cultural values not only in shaping policy, but also in the interpretation of reforms and educational equality. Multiple other inquiries have demonstrated that education policy is embedded in the nation state and its formation, the national system, national economy and culture, as well as in global or international discourses (e.g., Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Mukherjee, 2017; Spring, 2014). Consequently, policy approaches to educational inequality are also embedded in the characteristics of a country, including the interplay between various contexts (i.e., historical, social political and economic) and global developments, which collectively shape how educational inequality is discussed, conceptualised, and, in turn, codified in policy documents.

3.2.1 Historical and social context

Historical transformations and legacies are key to understanding how education is mobilised by the state and what role education fulfils in society. Luxembourg is a particularly interesting case, in which historical legacies have laid the foundations of today's educational system (and the inequalities within it). The country embarked on missions of state- and nation-building in the 19th century, characterised by internal factors – the central role of social class, elitism, the cultural importance of the Catholic church, and balance between the main spoken languages in the country – as well as external factors, namely the ongoing social and political influence of the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Germany (Thyssen, 2013 [LU]).

Luxembourgian policies have failed to clearly identify one national language and medium of educational instruction, even though Luxembourgish became the *lingua franca* of schools following the rise of nationalist ideology (1912 Education Act [LU]). The current education system is therefore based on trilingualism: while Luxembourgish remains the unique and mandatory language at pre-school level, at primary level, French and German are the languages of instruction [LU]. However, a surge in nationalist discourse has increased the importance of the Luxembourgish language, elevating it to a marker of belonging, which is at odds with the recognition of multilingualism as an asset (Weis, 2007, p. 11[LU]). In the meantime, the multilingual character of the education system continues to enjoy overwhelming support in the national discourse, despite international and national reports detailing the association between multilingualism and educational inequalities in the country [LU]. The challenges of multilingual education are further discussed in the next sub-section.

Similarly to Luxembourg, the Finnish history of nation-building after World War II has been decisive in the formation of its education policy. At that time, a strong emphasis was placed on the provision of equal education – an ethos that has remained strong within the Finnish mindset until today [FI]. Education policies have explicitly followed this principle: comprehensive school reform was implemented throughout Finland during the period 1972-1977 with the intention of building an inclusive, comprehensive and compulsory system of education for all Finnish children that could improve the level of education among all Finnish children, and decrease all forms of inequality [FI]. These reforms have, in turn, formed the basis of successive educational policies in the country. As a result of this ethos of equality, there is little discussion of educational inequalities in policy discourse, and existing inequalities are not acknowledged – despite research showing that tertiary education is highly stratified (Heiskala et al., 2021; Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2016; Nori, 2011 [FI]).

In Ireland, the historical role of the church in shaping the education system is noteworthy. For historical reasons, all primary schools and the majority of secondary schools are not public schools, but are locally owned by organisations or religious denominations (but are state-aided) (Eurydice, 2021 [IE]). The historical legacy of the church led to religion occupying a privileged place in education and in the structure of the education system that is truly unique among European countries (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). Where this legacy is particularly felt is in single-sex schools, which constitute a minority of Catholic schools. These schools 'were established at a time when separate schooling for boys and girls was the norm', and today are part of the general educational system, attended by a 'sizeable proportion of children' (Doris et al. 2013).

In the Central and Eastern European countries reviewed, historical legacies of socialism have a significant impact on education policy even today. Socialist ideology defined the policy discourse in these countries (HU, LT, GDR) for more than four decades, while encompassing certain inconsistencies when applied to education policy. Namely, while all individuals were seen as equal, disadvantages (stemming, for example, from low socio-economic status [SES]) were not acknowledged, and vulnerable groups of students (e.g., disabled students) tended to be educated separately in special educational institutions. Consequently, while education policy changed fundamentally after these countries experienced regime change and profound societal transformation accompanied by political and economic transformations, some legacies of socialism – primarily, the prevalence of special education schools – were hard to overcome (e.g., Bruzgelevičienė, 2008 [LT]). In Hungary, education policy has been shaped not only by socialist-era legacies, but also some deeply rooted societal values that date back to before the socialist era. These include widespread prejudice against Roma (which dates back to the state's early formation); the significant role of Christian churches; and generally negative attitudes towards poverty (e.g., Ádám & Bozóki, 2016; Neumann, 2022; Szikra, 2020 [HU]). Ultimately, changes in the education systems in these countries have entailed not only a new direction in policy, but also a need to adjust the culture and discourse within education policy to democratic expectations – a long, demanding task.

Historical changes complemented by great societal transformations are not unique to the cases of former socialist countries, however. For example, when gender equality gained momentum in Norway, the country's social structure was reorganised by altering the role of women. An increase in the number of women joining the workforce at beginning of the 1970s contributed directly to the long and gradual process of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services becoming nearly universal – an ongoing lasting several decades (Gulbrandsen, 2018; Korsvold, 2008 [NO]). Since then, accessibility and equal access to ECEC services has remained a central question for policy makers, resulting in series of acts (e.g., the 2003 Kindergarten Settlement, which increased the number of kindergartens and promoted equal treatment of public and private ECEC providers; also, the reduction and

capping of kindergarten education fees by the Norwegian parliament) (Johansson, 2020; Kornstad & Thoresen, 2003; Korsvold, 2008 [NO]).

In Germany, one of the country's most significant societal changes occurred with the growing number of 'guest workers' in the 1960s, which significantly diversified the population, including the student composition in schools. The political will to break with the long-standing historical denial of immigration to Germany – and the acknowledgement that Germany had become a country of immigration – happened with the country's first immigration act in 2004, and the first national summit on integration in 2006 (Borkert & Bosswick, 2007; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009 [DE]). This denial of immigration had previously prevented the formulation of a comprehensive national migration and education policy that would incorporate the needs of guest workers, displaced persons, ethnic German repatriates and refugees, leading to institutional discrimination and structural neglect of students with an immigrant background.

3.2.2 Political and cultural context

The political environment, political ideas and culture also play a powerful role in shaping education policy. In countries such as Norway and Finland, education is founded on the values of democracy, respect for human rights and the recognition of social diversity, echoing the countries' cultural and political values [FI, NO]. In fact, the democratic and egalitarian principles of inclusion and diversity are so central in Norway – where egalitarianism can be seen as a core cultural value – that they are a guiding principle not only of formal education, but also for the provision of non-formal educational [NO]. The example of Norway also highlights that culturally ingrained values such as egalitarianism are reflected in the country's definition of education (and educational inequality). As early as the 1970s (in the reform *Mønsterplan for grunnskolen* of 1974 (M74) [NO]), it was stated that all pupils are different but of equal worth (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2021) [NO] – an approach that continues to define education policy today. Unsurprisingly, then, the most recent curriculum for primary, secondary and upper-secondary schools contains a passage that education should be founded upon values such as democracy, respect for human rights and recognition of the diversity of pupils [NO]. In other words, in Norway, where diversity is culturally and historically rooted and promoted at the level of society, education is also mobilised in the interests of promoting and nurturing social diversity. Hence, discussions of educational inequality also assume the need to adapt education to address the differing needs of diverse students. This assumption, in turn, implies that there should be unequal treatment (positive discrimination) to provide the most inclusive and fair education system [NO].

Following the political transition in post-socialist Lithuania, education policy was largely re-oriented towards accessible education for all and addressing individual needs within the education system [LT]. Meanwhile, in Hungary the period between 1990 and 2010 was characterised by concepts such as integration and equal opportunities, although according to critics this era did not bring any significant improvements in the field of educational equality (Fuller et al., 2015; Györgyi, 2015; Kende, 2018; Neumann, 2022 [HU]). While integration, equalisation and desegregation were in focus in Hungary between 2002 and 2010 (Fuller et al., 2015; Kende, 2018; Zolnay, 2016 [HU]), after 2010, the deterioration in the democratic political environment in Hungary and the emergence of illiberal political principles has been reflected in the education system (Rostas & Kovacs, 2021 [HU]). More specifically, Hungary's current illiberal turn (referred to by some as 'post-communist neoconservatism'; see Neumann and Mészáros (2019) [HU]) led to the centralisation and re-nationalisation of schools in 2012 (Act CLXXXVIII of 2012 [HU]), as well as the policy-making process of the government being guided by conservative values both socially (nation, religion, traditional gender roles and family structure) and economically (etatism) [HU]. As a result, current

education policy tends to undermine inclusive education, and the reduction of educational inequalities is not among its priorities.

This trend is also indicated by the policy vocabulary and policy measures used. The vocabulary of educational policy clearly reflects a turn away from a focus on education equity, with terms such as 'inclusion', 'integration' and 'desegregation' being replaced with concepts such as 'catching up' and 'compensation for disadvantages' (Ferge, 2017; Kende, 2018 [HU]). Policy attention, or lack thereof, also speaks of a lack of interest in tackling inequalities: when it was introduced in 1985, the introduction of free school choice led to an 'unequal, socially and ethnically segregated public education system' (Neumann & Mészáros, 2019, p.120 [HU]); nevertheless, the principle of free school choice has not been challenged at the level of the government in Hungary. In addition, discrepancies in access to resources between richer and poorer municipalities were neither politically addressed, nor compensated by the central budget (Ercse & Radó, 2019; Ferge, 2017; Neumann & Mészáros, 2019 [HU]).

The political environment is also key to understanding Spain's education policy: Spain is an especially illustrative case, where education has become a key point of political confrontation, and each change of government has been followed by a major school reform [ES]. In the political arena, discussions centre around a conservative political stance (favouring free choice of school, private education, religious education, and leaning towards the technocratic model), and a progressive political stance (prioritising secular education and role of the state in school provision, regarding education as a public good, favouring the humanistic model), each of which has profound implications for how educational inequalities are defined and, consequently, mitigated.

Overall, the embedded view of education policy – and, by extension, the concepts that relate to educational inequality – also suggests that the role of education and the values disseminated through education may differ between countries. These themes are analysed in the ensuing section, in order to shed light on the normative underpinnings of narratives concerning educational inequality.

3.3 Dominant views and values of education

3.3.1 Role of education

The role of education is usually discussed in terms of two different trends, which some see as opposing: technocratic and humanistic. This dichotomy illustrates the diverse values embraced by the education system, as well as the differing views of students (and, by extension, of vulnerable groups). From the humanist perspective, the students themselves are the goal; according to the technocratic perspective, students tend to be the means. Consequently, 'humanistic concepts of education are based on the self-actualisation of a person' (Rodríguez, 2008 [ES]), while the technocratic model of education came to be seen as a driver for economic development (Lerena, 1976 [ES]). Importantly, the technocratic model is pervasive in neoliberal societies, redefining education to conform to market needs (Rodríguez, 2008 [ES]). It is also important to recognise that many education systems promote both to some extent – both well-being and skills to succeed in the labour market – but when priority is given to one or other perspective, this may have consequences with regard to the treatment of vulnerable groups and the policies formulated to address inequalities.

In all countries, these trends have been visibly negotiated by relevant actors in the field of education, through the conceptualisation of education in policy documents and as manifested in policy narratives. For example, under technocratic models, whose neoliberal logic prioritises individual responsibility and accountability (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), uneducated or under-educated members of society are seen as 'maladjusted', associated with

unemployment and delinquency (Rujas Martínez-Novillo, 2016 [ES]) or even 'undeserving' [HU]. In addition, based on this reasoning, micro-level factors (i.e., individuals and groups), rather than structural factors at the macro level (e.g., the school system) are to blame for the differences in educational outcomes [HU]. In educational systems more defined by humanistic perception, priority is given to the well-being of students and their individual needs [e.g., FI for ECEC and primary education]. Importantly, neither of these perspectives should be seen as absolute; rather, education policy is affected by a combination of both, to different degrees.

Narratives about educational equality, accordingly, also reveal manifestations of the two dominant trends presented above: 1) education presented as a right, and educational equality as a matter of justice; and 2) education presented as a tool for human capital, and educational equality as a matter of improving productivity. These narratives, in turn, contribute to the key goals incorporated into major educational policy documents. They describe education either as a tool to comprehensively develop and nurture youth, assuring their well-being, personal growth and skills to lead the life of a conscious citizens in a democratic society; alternatively, they define education as means to become a productive member of society, to learn skills to successfully join the labour force and to satisfy labour market demands. Importantly, this neoliberal perspective has direct consequences on how educational inequalities are conceptualised and mitigated, in some cases reducing strategies to meritocratic approaches – for example, by alleviating educational inequalities through scholarships.

In some countries, the two perspectives – technocratic and humanistic – pose tensions in terms of policy making, with debates centring on the role of education. In the case of Norway, this tension is manifested in a growing emphasis on education preparing young people for the labour market and the need for a competent workforce, which results in the gradual loss of the egalitarian ideals of inclusion and diversity. As a consequence of the technocratic model gaining ground, school management in Norway has been altered in recent decades; pedagogical frameworks and priorities have been adapted, and the Norwegian education system has become increasingly characterised by competition between schools (Bjordal & Haugen, 2021 [NO]). A similar tension is evident in Spain, where the conservative side of politics favours education that is aimed at employability, coupled with support for private education and free choice of schools; the progressive side of politics, meanwhile, promotes education for the sake of learning, with the state playing a strong role in ensuring that education is an accessible public service [ES].

The technocratic model is possibly most discernible in the case of Hungary, where the concept of a 'work-based society' (Köllő, 2020 [HU]) has been placed at the centre of education. A telling development is the placement of public education under the Ministry for Human Capacities after fusion of several ministries, while school-based vocational and adult training lie within the competence of the ministry responsible for economic governance (Mártonfi, 2019 [HU]). The role of education in creating a stronger economy is also emphasised in Spain's 'knowledge-based economy', a development that has been evident in Spanish education policy since the country's accession the European Union [ES]. Similarly, Switzerland has promoted education as means to increase the country's innovativeness and prosperity (WBF and EDK 2015; SERI 2021a [CH]), while Finland, a country with few natural resources, has invested in education as a key to the economic development of the entire country [FI].

Finland stands out as an example in which education policy is influenced by both the humanistic and the technocratic model. At the levels of early childhood education and basic education, policy documents are primarily concerned with the provision of quality education and care for students, while also considering their overall needs and well-being [FI]. Subsequently, at upper-secondary and tertiary levels, education is seen as means to success in

the labour market, with the main aim of facilitating the school-work transition [FI]. Importantly, if education is tied to the overall economic development and competitiveness of the country and to national growth, the correction of educational inequalities may also be framed as a broader societal endeavour, as it is the case in Switzerland [CH].

3.3.2 Values in education

In terms of the normative content and values endorsed through the educational process, each country under investigation did indeed outline a universal right to education as a state obligation. In terms of guiding principles, access to education is guaranteed to all, while in some countries equal education for all (e.g., FI, LT) and inclusive education (e.g., IE) are highlighted as supplementary values. In terms of the values underpinning education, divergence can be seen among the countries analysed, in relation to the following topics: 1) whether national values or multiculturalism are in focus; and 2) to what extent education pursues the goal of social integration. Accordingly, a difference appears in terms of whether education predominantly preserves national (or regional) identity[3] and/or promotes certain ideals and values beyond national principles (e.g., democracy, equality, multiculturalism and the like).

The case of Hungary, however, highlights that the policy narratives in strategic documents may constitute 'window dressing' that serves to satisfy international audiences, while in practice policies are largely unresponsive to the goals of equity and inclusivity (Ferge, 2017; Feischmidt and Vidra, 2011; Kende, 2013 [HU]). According to critics, the values disseminated through education in Hungary follow 'moral principles that became the basis of education policy' (Velkey, 2020, p. 320 [HU]) and ideological principles based on national interests (Radó, 2014 [HU]). As a result, centralisation and standardisation efforts in the realm of education serve these interests, rather than reducing inequalities or improving quality of education. In addition, values in education came to be defined in terms of a patriotic upbringing in line with nationalist and conservative values [HU], while in countries such as Luxembourg and Ireland, the education systems endorse multi- or interculturalism and diversity.

More specifically, in Luxembourg the mission of education is to prepare students as citizens in a democratic society, as well as promoting gender equality, ethical values, creativity and confidence [LU]. In Ireland, the Department of Education's Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015 was developed in recognition of the significant demographic changes in Irish society, which are reflected in the country's education system. It also endorsed respect for diversity in values, languages and traditions, which had been enshrined in the 1998 Education Act; in line with this, a critical role of education is to sustain an intercultural learning environment (DES, 2010 [IE]). For instance, as part of this strategy, all education providers are assisted in ensuring that inclusion and integration become the norm within an intercultural learning environment.

Interestingly, in some countries, the objective of preserving national identity through education may extend beyond the country's borders: testament to this is Lithuania's Global Lithuania Programme, introduced in 2011, which focuses on the formal and non-formal education of Lithuanian children abroad, facilitating their reintegration upon returning to their homeland (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2011 [LT]). While the role of education in preserving national identity is widespread, several consequences must be considered: on the one hand, the issue emerges of the linguistic rights in education of minority groups; on the

[3] To some extent, all education systems are concerned with the dissemination of national values, which have been the historical foundation of nearly all state-led efforts at mass education.

other hand, education may be overwhelmingly seen as a tool for inclusion. Each of these issues merits discussion.

In many cases, minority students are immediately grouped under the category of disadvantaged students, with linguistic and cultural differences seen as educational gaps (or challenges, at best). In the cases of diverse societies with sizeable native minority groups, demands for autonomy in educational matters may also lead to tension, especially when such efforts are seen as a danger to national unity. In Spain, for instance, nationalist parties in the Basque Country and Catalonia have called for (and, to varying degrees, succeeded in creating) a curriculum of their own, with a greater emphasis on the regional language, literature, history, geography, and other subjects [ES]. Yet, conservative forces in Spain regard the idea of schools teaching regional languages and cultures as unacceptable and as weaking national cohesion [ES].

As multilingual countries with a high proportion of migrants, Luxembourg and Switzerland are rather complex cases. Indeed, 47.35 % of the total population of Luxembourg are non-nationals speaking other languages at home – the highest percentage of a population with migration backgrounds among all European countries (STATEC, 2020 [LU]). In Switzerland, around 27 % of all students in compulsory school are of foreign nationality (FSO 2022[CH]). Hence, migration is a central issue occupying education policymakers in both countries, especially considering the multiple disadvantages suffered by migrants in education systems (e.g., Schnell & Fibbi, 2016 [CH]; Glauser, 2018 [CH]; OECD, 2019 [LU]). Thus, the two policy areas – education and inclusion – have become intricately intertwined, and the principle of integration (e.g., of migrants, people with disabilities, women) is strongly linked with education policy (Swiss Federal Council 2021b [CH]).

The use of multiple languages in education poses a serious challenge for non-native students. In Luxembourg, the preservation of national character in fact assumes a trilingual education system (Luxembourgish, French, and German), which represents a significant obstacle for non-national students [LU]. This disadvantage is multiplied when non-national students face other disadvantages (e.g., low SES) and must transition between levels of education which entails switching between languages of instruction [LU]. Switzerland has four official national languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh); consequently, the country places a strong emphasis on language teaching (particularly in primary schools) [CH]. Hence, mastery of the language of instruction is regarded as a prerequisite for educational success, and reducing deficits in language proficiency is a common approach to mitigating educational inequality.

In Lithuania, which has a significant number of linguistic minorities, there is bilingual education for minority students, who can study at schools in which subjects are taught in both the minority language and the national language (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo mokslo ir sporto ministerija, 2011, Education Law [LT]). This approach has gradually been superseded by a view of education as a tool for inclusion: the National Education Strategy for 2003-2012 emphasised the need to include minority students into mainstream education and, by extension, mainstream society [LT]. In a similar vein, the Education Law (2011) guaranteed that ethnic minority students should receive education in their native languages, but only in part, supplemented by education in the state language [LT]. As a result, the current requirement for children to receive part of their education in Lithuanian has been criticised by some minorities as discriminatory, putting non-Lithuanian speakers at a disadvantage in terms of attainment in and access to education (Urbaitytė, 2011; Adomavičiūtė, 2020; Busygina & Onishchenko, 2019 [LT]).

In the case of Norway – a country in which target groups are only vaguely described in education policy documents – the Sámi population is treated separately: having the status of indigenous people, Sámi students are entitled to receive instruction and textbooks in their own language (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017 [NO]). Consequently, the 2008 Education Act

highlights the importance to Sámi of protecting and developing Sámi language, culture and social life. In the meantime, Sámi culture is not treated separately from the prevailing national culture, as is the case in most of the other examples described above, but rather is incorporated into Norway's broader heritage and values of diversity, stating that 'the Sámi cultural heritage is part of the cultural heritage in Norway' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017: 6 [NO]). Nevertheless, some tensions arose, especially regarding Sámi kindergartens that may be viewed as a barrier to implementation of inclusion- and equality-oriented policy elements [NO].

The role of education in social inclusion is also reflected in various policy documents outside the field of education (e.g., the Lithuanian Action Plan to Increase Social Inclusion 2020-2023 [Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019] or the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania [Lietuvos Respublikos socialinių paslaugų įstatymas], 2006 [LT]). In a similar vein, in Germany the National Action Plan on Integration (NAP Integ, BBMFI 2011, 2020), a strategic action document that is aimed at the integration of people with a migration background and new immigrants, also focuses on education as a site of integration (although integration is defined with a focus on the labour market, with broader social integration being implied) [DE]. These examples demonstrate that education can be seen as a strategic field of action in which to achieve the integration of certain groups, and the value of education is thereby reframed in line with the goals of inclusion.

3.4 Non-formal education

Non-formal and informal learning are increasingly important to the overall success of students. The Council of Europe provides a comprehensive description of the two terms:

Non-formal learning	takes place outside formal learning environments but within some kind of organisational framework … it need not follow a formal syllabus or be governed by external accreditation and assessment. Non-formal learning typically takes place in community settings: swimming classes for small children, sports clubs of various kinds for all ages, reading groups, debating societies, amateur choirs and orchestras, and so on.
Informal learning	takes place outside schools and colleges and arises from the learner's involvement in activities that are not undertaken with a learning purpose in mind. Informal learning is involuntary and an inescapable part of daily life; for that reason, it is sometimes called experiential learning.

Source: Council of Europe, 'Formal, non-formal and informal learning' https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning

Despite the state-centric language of policy documents, in most countries non-state actors such as churches, private foundations or non-profit associations are becoming increasingly important players in educational provision, especially in the field of non-formal education. Such actors are involved in setting the educational agenda, and thus defining educational inequalities and ways to mitigate them. In other words, with the educational landscape becoming increasingly open to various non-state actors, the role of the state as the 'corrector of educational inequalities' [ES] has come under scrutiny. Yet, the national policy analyses point out that informal and non-formal learning still tend to be poorly integrated into education policy, even though non-formal and informal education are complementary to formal education and imperative in mitigating inequalities. Unsurprisingly, policy discourses and texts have so far devoted insufficient attention to the role of non-formal education in

addressing educational inequalities, given that in most countries, there is little or no regulation by public policy of informal and non-formal education.

Most non-state actors tend to be concentrated in the non-formal educational field. In Spain, for instance, most non-formal education interventions have been led by private organisations (generally non-profit foundations), and have therefore mostly remained outside political or policy debates [ES]. There are only two areas of education in Spain in which education outside the classroom has entered policy debates: the regulation of homework, and of in-company training. Both aspects are, in fact, critical to ensuring educational equality. By offloading a substantial part of learning to the home environment, educational success is made conditional on family resources, thus intensifying educational inequalities among already deprived groups (Martínez San Miguel, 2014; Runte-Geidel, 2014 [ES]). In terms of in-company training, the incorporation of this practice into educational curricula has contributed to the fight against early school leaving and the reduction of unemployment (Aguilar-González, 2015; Prieto, 2015 [ES]).

Two notable exceptions exist in relation to cooperation between formal and non-formal education, in Finland and Germany. In Finland, informal and non-formal education are discussed in the context of formal education, and there is continuous collaboration between these fields. Non-formal education providers (e.g., arts education associations, sports clubs, nature associations, political or religious youth associations, Girls' House, cultural centres etc.), can also apply for and receive funding for their activities from municipalities or ministries, and are thus regulated in this way [FI]. In Germany, informal and non-formal education are discussed in formal education, primarily as in terms of the question of cooperation between these sectors. Since the year 2000, a variety of forms of cooperation have emerged between schools and youth welfare services. The unifying element has been an understanding of education in a comprehensive sense, reflected in several national reports and other policy documents (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2018, 2020; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2005 [DE]).

In addition, to promote comprehensive, interlocking systems of formal, non-formal and informal education at local and regional levels, the concept of 'local educational landscapes' has become the guiding idea steering German education policy (Sendzik, 2020 [DE]). Most communes in Germany have already implemented such local education management networks (albeit with great variation) [DE]. Some forms of collaboration were apparent in other countries as well, such as in Ireland or Lithuania, where collaboration between the formal and non-formal sectors is promoted through government investment in such provisions [IE, LT]. In such cases, some criteria usually exist regarding what constitutes non-formal education (in Lithuania, for example, the criteria for non-formal education are defined by the Minister of Education and Science – see Concept Note on Children's Non-Formal Education, 2012 [LT]). In Ireland, such collaboration is manifested through projects such as the creation of Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYPs). These centre around local Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which represent a formal system in Ireland. Such partnerships include areas such as heritage and the environment, STEM and digital creativity.

Tensions may also be associated with the poorly defined role of non-formal education actors and their services. This tension is manifested in Spain through conflicting political debates regarding public and private education [ES]. In Germany, similarly, the role of private providers – an influential group in German education policy and the German youth welfare system – is widely debated and somewhat controversial (Thümler, 2011 [DE]). In part, these controversies revolve around the question of privatisation in education. The area in which tensions are most widespread among the countries analysed is the provision of ECEC. Even though early childhood education and care constitutes the elementary sector of education, in most countries, ECEC is neither mandatory nor subsidised by the state, making it inaccessible. As a result, ECEC services tend to be delivered outside the formal education

system by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary services. The rates of participation in ECEC services in the analysed countries are presented in the table below. The low rate in Switzerland is the result of expensive centre-based childcare, which is due – among other things – to a lower extent of state contributions or subsidies [CH].

Table 3. ECEC participation (2019), in %

Country & statistics	CH	DE	ES	FI	HU	IE	LT	LU	NO	EU
Participation children > 3[4]	49.4	94	97.3	88.8	92.9	100	89.6	88.4	97.1	92.8
Participation children > 4[5]	73.3	95.8	97.8	91.4	95.8	100	91.3	97.9	97.4	95.1

Source: Compiled by PPMI using Eurostat SDG 04_31

In Luxembourg, an attempt was made to include informal and non-formal education into the country's overarching legal framework in the National Code of Education, in order to create a coherent approach towards education [LU]. More specifically, the role of families and local authorities (as the implementers of state educational policy) is highlighted, by assigning them roles and responsibilities regarding the education of children and youth.

Overall, non-formal and informal education is increasingly becoming a field of intervention, despite being one that has (so far) seldom been explored by policy makers, with national-level policy documents often focusing exclusively on formal education. Meanwhile, examples from various countries reveal that non-formal education often acts as a complementary form of education, particularly with regard to nurturing talent, mitigating inequalities, or providing extended education (e.g., in LT, ES, CH). In the case of Lithuania, the recently accepted Educational Development Programme for 2021-2030, prepared by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Science, explicitly highlights the link between educational equality and the role of non-formal education. This promotes access to, and the quality of, non-formal education. This is achieved through improvements in the variety of non-formal education activities for different age groups, focusing on increasing the quality of non-formal education; promoting all-day schools to ensure better access to non-formal education; emphasising the inclusion of students with disabilities and special needs into non-formal education (2021-2030 m. Plėtros Programos Valdytojos Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo, Mokslo Ir Sporto Ministerijos Švietimo Plėtros Programos Pagrindimas, 2021 [LT]).

4 Prioritisation of vulnerable groups

Summary

- Policy discourse have tended to focus either on upholding certain standards, ideals or principles in education that promotes equity, or on groups that face educational inequalities.
- Policy attention to reducing early school leaving has prompted many countries to develop reintegration programmes and 'second chance' opportunities for youth and adults.
- Policy attention to mitigating the inequalities of particular groups has led to targeted support measures, such as providing financial assistance in recognition of socio-economic challenges that may hinder equal opportunities in education.
- Most policy documents have deliberately avoided mentioning precise target groups or forms of inequality in education, opting instead for far-reaching goals, such as promoting 'equality of opportunity', 'equal access' and 'education for all'.

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_04_31/default/table?lang=en
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_04_30/default/table?lang=en

- The power of external triggers in reshaping education policy is significant: in all of the countries analysed, international initiatives and discourses regarding equitable education have played a significant role in transforming the focus of education policy, but their influence is contingent on the national policy environment.
- Across all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic also served as an exogenous shock that forced policy makers to rethink the concept of educational vulnerability and inequality, with a focus on digital equality.
- In most countries, the national reports helped to identify vulnerable groups in the education system.

4.1 Evolution of vulnerable groups as a policy category

Having reviewed the evolution and meaning of various concepts and definitions relating to educational inequality, this section of the analysis turns to the characterisation of target groups (or vulnerable groups[6]) in policy documents. Undoubtedly, designing policies to address and mitigate educational inequalities among heterogeneous target groups is challenging, and this section is primarily concerned with the examination of how distinct sets of educational vulnerabilities have been defined and operationalised within policy discourse and documents. Analysis clearly reveals that the definition of vulnerable groups is historically contextualised and reflects evolving knowledge, norms and values. Meanwhile, definitions have also changed over time, partly as a result of various exogenous factors, such as new knowledge being exposed in national and international studies.

This evolution is well illustrated by the change in the meaning of 'educational inequalities' in Spain; 'students with special needs' in Lithuania; and 'disadvantaged groups' in Germany. In Spain, the question of educational inequalities in educational policy first appeared in the early 1970s, when they were defined as being a consequence of individual learning deficits [ES]. In the later decades, however, 'vulnerable' and 'socially excluded' groups began to appear in the policy discourse, recognising the multitude of structural and contextual factors that contribute to inequalities in educational settings.

In Lithuania, the evolution of 'special needs students' moved from a narrow, disability-focused model to a broader understanding of special needs that can arise from specific characteristics of a student and/or external factors (such as social conditions). Initially, students with special educational needs were characterised as those with physical and/or mental impairments, and segregation happened according to the severity of the disability (*Lietuvos švietimo koncepcija ('Concept of Lithuanian Education')*, 1992 [LT]). Then, education policies broadened the definition of students with special needs, moving the focus away from medical classification to focus on needs stemming from different abilities, personal characteristics and impairments, as well as external factors, thus including a wide range of students with special needs. With this, systemic segregation was abolished (National Education Strategy for 2003-2012 (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija, 2012 [LT]).

In Germany, the numerous economic, social, political and cultural changes that have taken place in the country over the last 50 years unmistakably served as a context for redefining forms of vulnerability. When considering an intersecting view of inequalities, while in the 1970s, the most disadvantaged group of students was 'Catholic girls from the countryside', today it is 'young male migrants in metropolitan areas' (Kuger & Prein, 2021 [DE]). These male students are not only identified as the most vulnerable group within the

[6] While this study uses the terms 'vulnerable' and 'at risk', it is important to point out research that criticises the 'risk discourse' as a socio-cultural construct with political and moral functions, which is not a neutral discourse but rather blames the victims (e.g., Lupton, 1993).

German education system, but also as the most pressingly problematic group, referred to as being 'hard to teach' and 'hard to integrate' (Wellgraf, 2012 [DE]).

Based on this postulation that the definition of vulnerable groups is an embedded concept that changes over time, the following section analyses how vulnerable groups are identified through policy discourse, and what factors serve as stimuli to change these definitions.

4.2 Who are the vulnerable groups?

Across countries, policy discourse has tended to focus either on upholding certain standards, ideals or principles in education that promote equity, or on those groups that face educational inequalities. In the case of the former, 'equal opportunities', 'equity for all' and 'inclusive' education are emphasised, with adverse phenomena such as early school leaving or discrimination being targeted in addition. In the case of the latter, there has been an explicit intention to identify vulnerable categories as beneficiaries of various policy measures. As a caveat, these foci are not mutually exclusive, but are mentioned separately for analytical purposes. In reality, in many countries, principles of equality that are applicable to all are supplemented with an effort to also target specific groups.

In many of the countries analysed, policy documents have deliberately avoided mentioning precise target groups or forms of inequality in education, opting instead for far-reaching goals such as promoting 'equality of opportunity', 'equal access' and 'education for all' – concepts that are also often included in European education policy strategies. In Switzerland, the concepts of equity and equality of rights in the Federal Constitution form the basis for all of the key educational policy documents discussed in the course of this section [CH]. In the case of Finland, where educational equity, trust and responsibility, and autonomy at an institutional and individual level are the key principles of the educational system, the most important goal is to guarantee equal educational opportunities for all children and youth, regardless of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, or place of living (Republic of Finland, 2998 [FI]). As a result, equity as such is not a specifically emphasised characteristic of education policy, the general aim of which is to support every individual in their own interests throughout the educational path, to find their own interests and strengths; it also aims to support families, parents and guardians in raising and supporting their children [FI]. In Lithuania, where equal access to education is prominent in policy documents, there is an emphasis on individual needs within the education system, which has led to personalised or differentiated education formats available to all, with the aim of helping any individual to develop an independent and creative personality and reach their full potential through education (Nacionalinė mokyklų vertinimo agentūra, 2014; Bruzgelevičienė & Žadeikaitė, 2008 [LT]).

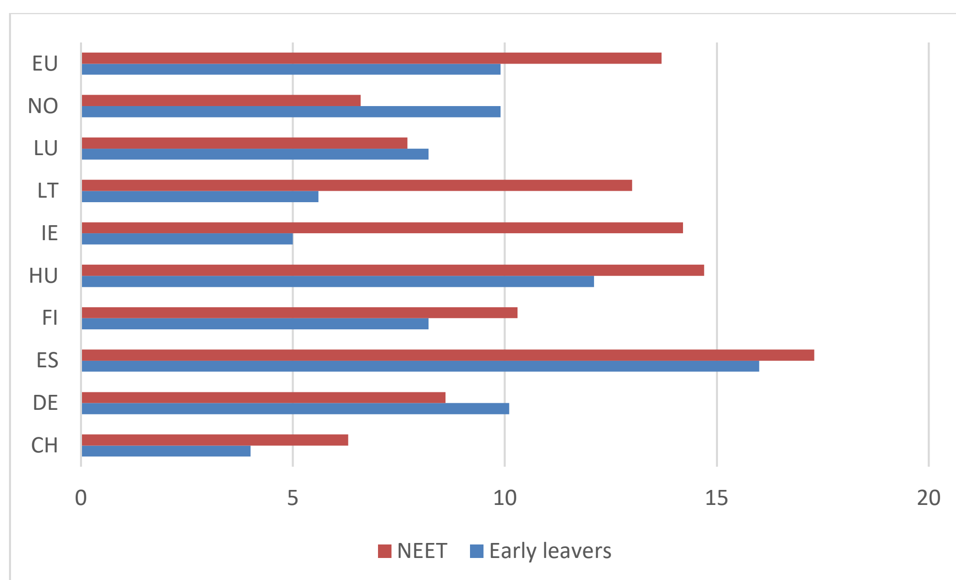
In Norway, there is a broader societal goal of fostering diversity – hence the collective targeting of 'inclusion of all' in education [NO]. Accordingly, the curriculum of the education system in Norway overall expresses an open and inclusive attitude towards children with different life stances, cultures and traditions, making its target groups all children and young people [NO]. In Ireland, significant policy attention is given to mitigating 'educational disadvantage', which is defined as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools' (Government of Ireland, 1998 [IE]). However, there is a growing recognition that different groups of children can experience educational disadvantage. Interestingly, in the case of Germany, in order to tackle educational inequalities, policy discourse has moved beyond concepts such as 'equal opportunity' and 'justice of opportunities' to the concept of *Teilhabe* (participation in the sense of realising social entitlements). The term

Teilhabe connects social and educational policy discourses and policies (Bartelheimer et al., 2020 [DE]).

Another important principle that has emerged in education policy is inclusive education, which is an overarching goal of improving access to education in all of the countries reviewed. Yet, despite the fact that inclusive education features to some extent in all policy documents, it is nevertheless conceptualised differently in various countries, and hence profound differences appear in its realisation. For example, in terms of inclusive education for disabled students, policies range from not segregating students with special needs from mainstream schools, regardless of their special needs or social, cognitive, or psychological characteristics [e.g., in LU] – as any form of segregation was seen as defying the very meaning of inclusive education – to allowing certain forms of separate education for student groups with complex needs, who would allegedly not manage in a mainstream school [e.g,. LT, IE].

In addition, in many countries where there was a focus on educational equality, rather than singling out target groups, adverse phenomena were tackled, such as discrimination in education and early school leaving. (For statistics on early school leavers in each country analysed, see Figure 4 below.) Policy attention to reducing early school leaving has prompted many countries to develop reintegration programmes and 'second chance' opportunities for youth and adults [e.g., ES, LU)]. A closer look at which groups constitute early school leavers in Norway led to the recognition that boys, migrant students and students with disabilities are over-represented (Meld.St.21, 2020 [NO]).

Figure 3. Early school leavers (2020), in per cent



Source: Compiled by PPMI using Eurostat LFSE and YTH_EMPL, NEET refers to not in education, employment or training

Where countries' policy documents consider specific target groups, in many cases these tend to be described in broad, general and compendious categories that are intentionally vague. These collective terms outline a broad range of inequalities in terms of access, achievement or attainment in education, usually referring to 'students with special needs', 'disadvantaged students', 'students requiring special attention' and 'socially excluded students', as some of the more common terms used. Each of these categories includes a wide range of groups, such as students with learning disabilities, students with mental challenges, students with low socio-economic status, or minority students (linguistic and ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees). In general, mitigating the inequalities of particular groups leads to targeted support measures, such as providing financial assistance in recognition of socio-economic challenges that may hinder

equal opportunities in education [ES, LU]. These over-generalised groups are criticised, however, for erasing the heterogeneity among vulnerable students and failing to recognise the specific barriers some students face in accessing education.

Despite the nebulous definitions of target groups used in policy documents, in certain countries these broad categories are applied to a specific, narrow segment of society. In the case of Ireland, while educational inequality is defined in broad terms, the operationalisation of this term specifically relates to socio-economic disadvantage [IE[7]]. In Germany, the sole targets of the National Action Plans on Inclusion are students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, confining the concept of inclusion to the field of disabilities (UN-BRK, 2009 [DE]). Likewise, in Lithuania, inclusive education primarily applies to students with special educational needs [LT]. In Hungary, although the Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education mentions equality of treatment as an important principle underlying all educational activities, the implementation of this principle focused on inequality along the axis of geographical setting, while 'the concept of social inequality of opportunities has not been applied in education policies' (Ferge, 2017, p.197 [HU]). Hence, the complete centralisation of administration (including funding and practice) was seen as the best solution to issues of educational inequality (Györgyi, 2015 [HU]). In some countries, one axis of inequality – that of gender – tends to be ignored in education policies, despite scientific evidence on gender-based educational gaps. A notable exception to this is Switzerland, which has various gender-related education policies in place with regard to STEM [CH].

Where target groups are broadly defined, the role of teachers and schools must be emphasised in identifying inequalities, recognising vulnerabilities and applying various policy measures. In Lithuania, where all students can have a personalised education plan and educational support in order to address their educational disadvantages, it is up to schools and teachers to recognise what forms of inequalities, intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges students may face, and to develop a support mechanism that caters to students' needs [LT]. Similarly, in Ireland, schools identify students for support based on a range of criteria including socio-economic factors (e.g., family history of early school leaving), membership of a minority group (e.g., Travellers), and outcome characteristics (e.g., poor attendance and behaviour) [IE]. In general, tensions emerge when the recognition of vulnerable groups must happen at the micro level, with no autonomy or flexibility in doing so.

The next question that arises is how and why there might be a shift in the discourse regarding vulnerable groups in education policy, leading to a reorientation in areas of focus or a redefinition of vulnerable groups. The next section discusses the evolution of vulnerable groups by considering exogenous factors – the role of international standards and studies, as well as the effects of national reports – on the interpretation of educational vulnerability.

4.3 Evolution of vulnerable groups: the role of exogenous factors

The previous section showed that while there are some overarching themes across countries, in general, wide variation exists in the definition of educational equality in policy documents. This may indicate a lack of policy convergence, despite the existence of some general frameworks (i.e., international and EU standards) which each of the countries under investigation follows in its policy making. Externalities – exogenous factors such as globalisation, international reports and national studies – play an important role in policy making, but their influence is also contingent on the national policy environment. For example, globalisation was identified as a relevant force in harmonising educational systems within countries such as Switzerland, resulting in the Intercantonal Agreement on Educational

[7] In Ireland, while the main focus is on socio-economic disadvantage, various policy documents and interventions nevertheless address a variety of groups, such as Travellers or SEN students.

Coordination (EDK 2007a [CH]), which defined minimum standards regarding enrolment age, duration of compulsory education and the start of the school year, among other aspects (Année Politique Suisse, 2022; Grunder, 2012 [CH]).

International standards undoubtably set the tone for policy making in all of the countries analysed, while comparative and national assessments tended to act as external triggers, revealing gaps in access and equality in education, as well as transforming the focus of education policy. In the case of Luxembourg, national and international reports identified educational inequalities as fundamental social challenges, leading to series of educational policies and reforms that aimed to create accessible, enabling and inclusive environments for all learners [LU]. Such reports also had a significant effect in other countries, analysed below. This effect has been most remarkable in the case of countries with a strong history of segregation [e.g., DE] and in former socialist countries [LT, and HU until 2010], which have demonstrated a decisive turn away from a state segregationist, deficit-focused approach towards inclusive education.

4.3.1 International factors

International standards are key to establishing common goals and promoting the educational values to be pursued by all countries. Internationally, in 2015 states adopted the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4, which requires that they ensure ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UNESCO, 2020). The key goals of SDG4 are accessibility and inclusivity of education across all countries, and among its targets are universal early childhood, pre-primary, primary and secondary education, as well as gender equality and inclusion. In the case of the European Union (EU), equitable and inclusive education for all European citizens is at the centre of education policy, manifested in strategic cooperation frameworks such as ‘Education and Training 2010’, ‘Education and Training 2020’ and the European Commission’s Strategic Plan 2020-2024.

Irish educational policy has been very heavily influenced by the OECD and by the country’s results in international assessments [IE]. International influences on the Finnish basic education curriculum can be clearly observed through its emphasis on inclusivity and prioritising 21st-century skills [FI]. In the Swiss education system, there are multiple references to international agreements and recommendations in policy documents. As an illustration, the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy (Swiss Federal Council, 2021) is a direct execution of UNESCO’s Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (with the principle in UN’s Sustainable Development Goals of ‘Leaving no one behind’). With regard to disabilities, Switzerland’s Disability Equality Act (BehiG) was situated within the broader framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006. Meanwhile, the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child served as a frame of reference for the optimisation and implementation of this convention in Switzerland in 2015 (Swiss Federal Council, 2018), recognising that every child has a right to education without being disadvantaged on the basis of gender, social or cultural origin.

In addition to the role played by international and EU-level agreements in shaping the core principles of education policy, international and comparative studies have also been significant in promoting change, especially in the field of educational equality. In many countries, large-scale international student assessment studies have sparked alarm concerning high levels of inequality, prompting policy debates and a series of policy discussions. For example, both Germany and Norway have experienced a ‘PISA[8] shock’ (Hovdenak & Stray,

[8] PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is the OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is a study that evaluates educational systems. ‘PISA measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.’ Source: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/

2014; Sjøberg, 2014; Volckmar, 2016 [NO]) prompted by unexpectedly poor results in the OECD's comparative Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Another illustrative case is France, a country not covered by the PIONEERED project, where PISA evaluation 'provided an additional window of opportunity for overcoming the backlog of overdue and deep structural [educational] reforms' (Dobbins & Martens, 2012, p. 37). In Norway, the results of the 2001 PISA survey showed that Norwegian secondary school students performed worse than their counterparts in comparable countries, surprising both the public and policy makers and leading to a review of education policy (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2021 [NO]).

Germany's 'PISA shock' in 2000 highlighted the high level of educational inequality in access to and uptake of education among children with migration backgrounds and low socio-economic status. Consequently, the German education system had to reconsider the very definition of vulnerable and disadvantaged students [DE]. As part of this process, inclusive education was brought to the forefront and the role of ECEC was highlighted, strengthening a life-course approach to education policy (Powell et al., 2021; Scholz et al., 2018 [DE]). These changes have brought about some improvements in recent years, although international comparative studies still report that children's success at school depends more on their social background in Germany than in many other countries (OECD, 2018 [DE]). German education policies since the PISA shock of 2000 can be described as an attempt to mitigate unequal learning and educational opportunities through standardisation and harmonisation [DE].

International assessment had also a significant effect on Hungary's education policy: partly as a consequence of the country's 2000 PISA assessment, multiple changes were implemented to reduce inequality in education, pave the way towards the desegregation of schools, and introduce stricter rules for categorising children as 'special needs' (Act LXI of 2003; Act CXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment) (Fuller et al. 2015; [HU]). However, for multiple reasons including poor policy implementation and scarcity of funding, this early progressive thinking did not yield significant results (Györgyi, 2015; Kovai & Neumann, 2015 [HU]). Hence, in the case of Hungary, while international studies have an initial impact, the effect of this was short-lived.

Overall, large-scale international surveys such as TIMMS, PIRLS and PISA have indeed had a great influence on policies, especially in highlighting how various aspects of education (achievement level, inequality and alike) in a given country compare with other countries. Nevertheless, the standardised measures used in international surveys may also fall short in accounting for goals such as diversity or the inclusion of 'adapted learning' – a stated goal of Norwegian education policy [NO]. In addition, while studies such as the OECD country reports have helped to accelerate some reforms, they have also probably strengthened the neoliberal turn in education [FI].

4.3.2 National factors

To inform policy making, many countries rely on some kind of mechanism to generate scientific knowledge about various aspects of education, including educational inequality and the vulnerable groups most affected by unequal access to education. This research, in turn, feeds into policy discussions by providing empirical data on policy-relevant questions. In the case of Switzerland, the Swiss Education Report is published every four years, which discusses inequalities in access to and the uptake of education at all educational stages. The report plays a crucial role in the education monitoring process, providing a basis for policy formulation and serving as a reference work for assessing equity in the Swiss educational landscape [CH]. For instance, the current Swiss Education Report identifies migration, low socio-economic status and female gender as the sources of inequalities prevalent at every educational stage (SCCRE 2018, p. 36f. [CH]).

A similar mechanism for soliciting background research to aid policy formulation also exists in Norway, where the government appoints a commission to investigate a specific issue, leading to official reports written by appointed committees of working groups. These reports provide the foundation for a white paper, which in turn is presented to the Parliament, where it will 'form the basis of a draft resolution or bill at a later stage' (Regjeringen, 2017, 2020, n.d.a, n.d.b [NO]). Norway is a notable example in which the foundations of educational change – contributing to new conceptualisations of educational inequality – may also be laid through a democratic process involving open consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and institutions, as was the case with the 2017 reforms of the primary and secondary education curriculum (Regjeringen, 2017 [NO]).

In the case of Ireland, a 1965 report entitled 'Investment in Education' was the first systematic review of educational inequality and disadvantage, and has since become the foundation for educational policy documents (OECD/Department of Education, 1965 [IE]). As a result, over the decades, there has been an explicit commitment to reducing and preventing educational disadvantage [IE]. On multiple other occasions, research in Ireland has revealed gaps in the system: for example, given the stated goal of intercultural learning environments, one set of research showed that school admission policies in Ireland placed new arrivals from other countries in a disadvantaged position (Smyth et al., 2009 [IE]). To address this, the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 aimed to make the situation more equitable by requiring schools to revise their admission criteria [EI].

Another instance in which knowledge was gathered not only from the scientific community, but from other stakeholders in a manner akin to Norway comes from Finland. When a new type of national Core Curriculum was implemented in 1994, it was prepared through broad collaboration among educational experts, stakeholders, researchers and teachers. Before 1994, schools and teachers had no role in the process of creating the curriculum, despite being expected to put it into practice [FI]. This marked a notable change in policy making by allowing diverse stakeholders to voice their experiences and expectations, which reflected the need to enhance school-level development and promote active participation and engagement of teachers in the curriculum process, as well as moving pedagogical decision-making and responsibility down to municipal and school level, and utilizing teachers' expertise more extensively in school development. To this end, analyses regarding future developments within and outside the school were conducted (e.g., Hellström, 2004; Kosunen, 1994; Patrikainen, 1999; Rokka, 2011 [FI]).

In the case of Hungary, national-level reports heavily criticised the extent of nationalisation in the school system. This criticism contributed to a wave of change, easing centralization and reintroducing some – albeit still limited – school autonomy (Semjén et al. 2018 [HU]). However, after 2010, centralisation and standardisation of education intensified, and in the field of education there was a general rejection by policy-makers of scientific expertise (Kopasz & Boda, 2018; Mártonfi, 2019 [HU]). Consequently, there is currently a lack of transparency or consultations with stakeholders and experts prior to the introduction of education policies (ibid. [HU]).

In Germany, academic studies were central in formulating policy definitions: the concept of 'educationally disadvantaged' specifically refers to the definition proposed in the national education report 'Education in Germany 2016', which assigns this category to children with a background characterised by any of three risk factors: social risk (if none of the parents in the household are employed); financial risk (if the family income is below the poverty threshold); and education-related risk (if the parents have completed neither vocational training nor higher education) (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2016 [DE]). This definition is mobilised by numerous policy documents. Subsequent studies, such as the national education report (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020 [DE])

looked more deeply into the category of vulnerability in education and revealed that children from families with a migration background are disproportionately disadvantaged.

In addition, across all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic served as an exogenous shock that forced policy makers to rethink the concept of educational vulnerability and inequality, with a focus on 'digital equality'. Digital equality builds on the assumption that everyone should have access to broadband technologies and the digital skills to use them. The rapid progress of digitalisation poses new challenges not only for students and educators, but also for the entire education system. In Spain, following school closures due to the pandemic, inequalities linked to access to and the use of digital technologies burst into education policy and public debate (Bonal & González, 2020 [ES]). In Finland, the COVID-19 pandemic has alerted policy-makers to burnout among upper-secondary students and tertiary students [FI]. In Switzerland, where digitalisation had become a key priority for education policy-makers and administrators even before the pandemic, the importance of digitalisation in educational policy-making is underlined by a recently published report summarising the state of digitalisation in the Swiss education system. The report concludes that there is urgent need to advance the integration of ICT and related resources in schools, as well as to improving the monitoring of digitalisation in education (Educa, 2021 [CH]). It remains to be seen whether this wake-up call is temporary, or if new reforms focusing on the well-being of upper-secondary and tertiary students will be implemented in the future.

In summary, it is apparent that although changes in the realm of education policy may cumbersome, various factors at both national and international levels can nevertheless spur debate and result in changes. Among these changes are explicit shifts in the way vulnerability in education is defined and operationalised. To further analyse the evolution and meanings of these definitions, the next section of this report applies the MILC framework to disentangle whether intersectionality and life-course approach are considered in policy formulations relating to vulnerable groups in the education system.

5 The MILC approach in education policy

Summary

- The conceptualisation of inequalities in formal policy documents has not paid sufficient attention to intersectionality, despite the presence of some forms of intersectional inequality.
- Similarly, insufficient attention is paid to the role of inequalities over the course of the educational path and beyond (life-course approach), as well as to the barriers students may face when transitioning between education levels.
- Early childhood is a crucial phase for effective policy interventions aimed at preventing inequalities during the future stages of education.
- Integration policy is more attentive to an intersectional approach to inequalities, as it relates to educational attainment.

The MILC approach was introduced in the 'Methodology and conceptual assumptions' section of this report, and is further elaborated in Deliverable 2.1, entitled 'State of research report – definitions, conceptual approaches, empirical findings'. According to D2.1:

> *the MILC (Multilevel, Intersectionality, and Life-Course) approach, centres on a life-course perspective and incorporates multiple origins and levels of educational inequality and their intersections. It is assumed that educational advantages and disadvantages are likely to accumulate throughout the life-course and develop not from one singular factor, but rather from a range of factors located on different analytical levels: the micro, meso, and macro level. Moreover, as educational inequality is structured along different axes of*

inequality, such as gender or social origin, specific disadvantages arise where these axes of inequality intersect (D2.1: 4-5)

Accordingly, this section highlights elements of the MILC approach evident in policy documents; namely, the analysis focuses on whether policy narratives paid any attention to intersectionality, the life-course perspective and a multilevel approach.

Across all countries, vulnerability relevant to the educational realm is not restricted to pedagogical issues, but also recognises multiple forms of deprivation, different needs and conditions of students that affect their ability to perform within the education system, as well as unequal conditions, in which educational resources and opportunities are distributed unequally. Inherent to this is a complex view of educational vulnerability (perhaps with an implicit aspect of intersectionality), although most countries – with notable exceptions – fall short of deliberately ascertaining the axes of inequalities and highlighting intersectionality in policy documents. There is also widespread recognition that successful performance in school, or lack thereof, is not simply dependent on students' ability to learn, but on a wide spectrum of reasons that operate on multiple levels. Such reasons may range from the structure of households, the dynamics of cultural estrangement, and migrant backgrounds (Martínez García, 2017; Tapia, 2002 [ES]) to emotional and behavioural difficulties [IE].

There is an indication of intersectionality in the case Ireland, where educational disadvantages are addressed in terms of the level of concentration – taking into account the 'multiplier effect' when a significant proportion of students in a school face disadvantages, particularly that of low socio-economic background – and intersectionality, which recognises the compounded nature of various forms of disadvantages (between socio-economic disadvantage and other forms of inequality) (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2003; Smyth et al., 2015 [IE]). Research to date has revealed the intersectionality of educational disadvantage/inequality during students' educational careers and when moving from one level of education to another (e.g., Banks et al., 2012; Cosgrove et al., 2018; McCoy et al., 2019 [IE]). To support students, various initiatives have been introduced, including the Special Education Teaching Allocation in 2017, to provide special education teaching support to schools based on students' individual learning needs (Mihut & McCoy, 2020 [IE]).

In Switzerland, the 2030 Sustainable Strategy mentions a number of intersectional inequalities that are disadvantageous in society and in the education system in particular [CH]. For instance, young people with a migration background from low-SES households are more likely to live in precarious living conditions and to underperform in school. In the case of Switzerland, where ECEC services are costly, families with low SES also lack access to early childhood education and care, which is particularly important for promoting the successful uptake of education later on, as well as in acquiring sufficient language skills, which are especially important in the case of the multilingual Swiss education system [CH]. Other aspects of intersectionality are embedded into the Swiss policy discourse: one policy report pointed out the socially vulnerable situation of young females with a migration background, which affects their further education (Swiss Federal Council 2021b, see also: EDK 2016 [CH]). With regard to disability, women and children with disabilities have been assessed as being particularly vulnerable persons (Art. 6 and Art. 7., The Federal Office for the Equality of Persons with Disabilities [EBGB]). Furthermore, the axes of disabilities, gender, poverty and social disadvantage as well as of migration background are recognised as having an effect on educational outcomes throughout the entire educational trajectory (EDK, 2015, p. 51) [CH]).

In other countries, while intersectionality *per se* is not mentioned, the concept is employed in various formulations of vulnerable groups. For instance, in Lithuania, the Education Law singles out students from ethnic minorities who have special educational needs – particularly students with hearing or speech impairments – stipulating that such groups with intersecting needs should have access to learning in their native sign language

[LT]. In the contexts of Hungary, Spain, Ireland and Lithuania, Roma (or Travellers) are targeted as vulnerable groups facing intersecting forms of discrimination that diminish their chances in school. Vast research has demonstrated that the vulnerabilities of Roma must be understood as a result of intersecting forms of inequalities, stemming from their ethnicity, poverty and societal discrimination. In the cases of both Hungary and Lithuania, it is primarily within the realm of integration policy that the role of education is discussed, recognising intersectional vulnerabilities. In Lithuania, the Action Plan for Roma Integration into Lithuanian Society for 2015-2020 (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ministras, 2015) highlights the need to ensure that Roma children are provided with equal educational opportunities. The Action Plan emphasises intersectional discrimination faced by young Roma women and girls.

The Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (HNSIS) explicitly highlights intersectional viewpoints, and in particular the vulnerability of Roma women, and takes a life-course perspective [HU]. Nagy et al. (2020) [HU]) state that 'it is essential to develop a legal environment, education management and inclusive school environment that support joint education and break school separation' by reducing the discrepancies in quality between schools and teachers. For each level of education, the Strategy promotes tools to reduce drop-out rates and increase access to education, as well as improving its quality. In addition, the HNSIS is not limited to formal education, but also expects non-formal education to help foster social inclusion, and to assist in the development of the personalities and creativity of disadvantaged and Roma pupils.

So far, however, this intersectional attentiveness to Roma students' needs has not been effectively translated into education policies, and Roma – let alone Roma girls – do not appear as a separate target group in general education policy documents in most of the countries analysed. This inattention to Roma has been criticised in the case of Switzerland, which demonstrates little awareness towards certain groups that may experience educational disadvantage, such as members of the Traveller community, Jenische, Sinti or Roma [CH].

The relevance of an intersectional approach to education in integration policy is also evident in the case of Germany. The German NAP Integ (National Action Plan on Integration), mentioned earlier, employs a life-course perspective, and thus takes into account the various levels of the education system, from early childhood education to schooling (including upper-secondary education), to VET and tertiary education [DE]. The measures contained in the NAP Integ focus on formal education, but also comprise elements relevant to non-formal and informal education, such as close cooperation with parents and their continuing education (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, 2011, 2020 [DE]). Another noteworthy aspect of the most recent NAP Integ is its attention paid to first- and second-generation migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, reflecting the social changes that began in 2015 with the arrival of large numbers of migrants into Germany.

In countries such as Finland, support for individuals' life-long learning and utilisation of educational possibilities throughout their life-course have been integral aspects of the education system, with versatile multi-professional support and guidance for children, youth and families throughout the educational path. In most countries, however, the life-course approach manifests itself in two areas: addressing drop-out rates through the re-enrolment of students (with the goal of addressing educational inequality), and improving access to ECEC to promote better chances throughout learners' educational trajectories (with the goal of preventing educational inequalities). These two aspects merit a further discussion.

Early childhood education is generally recognised as the most important stage of education, strongly affecting future attainment. This view is rooted in research findings that suggest the long-lasting effects of early childhood disadvantage on educational success. These assumptions are built on the so-called 'Matthew effect', which maintains that learning is cumulative throughout one's educational trajectory (Dannefer, 1987 [NO]). As a consequence,

ECEC and preschool have become increasingly important phases during which measures against inequality are implemented, and in many countries, policy-makers have been concerned with the expansion of measures aimed at mitigating early childhood disadvantages.

For instance, in Hungary – a country with a poor record of addressing educational inequalities – a notable measure with potential impact on vulnerable students' chances through their life-course was introduced in 2015. This made kindergarten education mandatory from the age of 3 (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education [HU]). In Luxembourg, having recognised the importance of ECEC, a standardisation effort began in 2009 with the creation of a framework for formal and non-formal educational institutions at ECEC level, with the aim of improving access and equality for young children [LU]. In Norway, there is a similar understanding that kindergarten lays the foundation for future educational trajectories, opportunities in the labour market, and possibilities for developing one's potential (Meld.St.6, 2019 [NO]). It is notable that in Norway, the importance of 'early efforts' has been stressed in policy discourse since the 1970s [NO].

In Lithuania, the current National Education Programme prioritises early childhood education as the foundation for future educational achievements, and proposes additional measures to promote and equalise students' access to formal ECEC. More specifically, the Programme emphasises help for families in the form of social support, to ensure that their children can attend formal ECEC (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2020) [LT]). This focus indicates a recognition of the continuity of education trajectories, namely that participation in early childcare will better prepare socially disadvantaged students to succeed at later stages of education. As the Programme puts it, the goal is 'to ensure that all children have an equal *starting position* and equal opportunities for quality education, regardless of their residence and socio-economic background' (emphasis added). Similarly, to mitigate the disadvantages of students in rural areas, improvements are proposed to access to ECEC services in Lithuania (National Education Strategy for 2013–2022 [LT]).

Several countries explicitly target drop-out rates (described in Section 4 under 'Prioritisation of vulnerable groups') through efforts aimed at the reintegration of those who have already dropped out of education. In Luxembourg and Spain, this is through educational offers that combine academic training with professional apprenticeships within companies (Prieto, 2015 [ES]). In countries such as Luxembourg, it tends to be the non-formal educational sector that offers opportunities to adults who have prematurely left the school system (e.g., the School for second chance [LU]). This is a noteworthy example of non-formal educational practices being mobilised to facilitate the reintegration of early school leavers or drop-outs as part of the government's lifelong learning strategy. In Switzerland, policy-makers and educational practitioners acknowledged the importance of tackling inequalities that arise during transitions between stages of education (emphasising especially the transition from lower-secondary education to upper-secondary education) in order to reduce drop-out rates and promote long-lasting positive effects on further stages of education (EDI et al. 2011, WBF and EDK 2015, 2019 [CH]).

These examples demonstrate that in terms of the life-course approach, there is a clear prioritisation of ECEC as the foundation for future educational achievements, yet this emphasis fades away during subsequent stages of education. Switzerland is an exception, where limitations on the accessibility and affordability of formal childcare services are not addressed in key policy documents, and where, as mentioned previously, childcare is expensive [CH]. Overall, with the intersectionality of inequalities remaining overlooked in policies, educational reforms may fail to bring about fundamental changes to enhance equality in education across various levels [LU].

6 Summary and implications

Overall, this comparative analysis demonstrates that the definition and operationalisation of educational inequality, as well as the forms of vulnerabilities experienced by students, continue to evolve over time. In addition, these concepts are embedded in countries' historical, political and social environments, while also responding to exogenous changes and international trends. In other words, the analysis of educational policy documents reveals an interplay between engrained values of historical and cultural significance, and the need to adapt (and respond to) societal transformations. While education policy reflects historical and cultural legacies such as multiculturalism or egalitarianism, education policy must also be adjusted to meet new challenges, such as increasing diversity in society due to intensified mobility between countries, as well as socio-economic disparities, gender inequalities, pandemics and other dynamics.

Although countries strive to conform to internationally accepted standards of education and adhere to some values, nevertheless it is also evident that these standards and values are interpreted within the normative, legal and institutional frameworks of the given countries. In other words, the analysis showed that there is a complex web of interactions that are responsible for negotiating the goal(s) of education, and with that the meaning of educational inequality as well. This process is intermittently affected by exogenous factors, such as migration flows, pandemics or other phenomena, introducing new challenges in the realm of education.

Accordingly, there is a growing understanding of diversity within the student body and of students' needs, together with a (slowly) emerging awareness of intersectionality and the life-course approach, which have entered education policy in particular through measures prioritising early childhood education and care as the foundation for future educational achievements. In all countries, a transformation has been observed in the meanings of vulnerability and educational inequality. In most cases, this has meant a move away from pedagogical or medical considerations, to a more diverse understanding that incorporates other factors such as household structure, family background and the dynamics of cultural estrangement, as well as ethnic or migrant backgrounds. However, further attention may be needed to the life-course approach and to intersectionality in order to promote a better understanding of the interrelationships between different types of disadvantage among students. Indeed, academic findings persistently highlight that intersectionality – with its focus on interrelated disadvantages – is key to understanding inequalities in the education system.

Another implication of the analysis is the importance of holistic approaches to tackling educational inequalities. Examples detailed in this study indicate that the mitigation of educational inequalities is often coupled with changes to the health, social and transportation systems, as well as to cultural norms, to name just a few. Research pertaining to inclusive education also emphasises the importance of a holistic view of the concept of educational inequality; as one study explains, inclusive education has three interconnected dimensions: inclusive cultures, inclusive policies, and inclusive practices (Kende, 2021, p.22 [HU]). In a similar vein, the present analysis concludes that cooperation between formal and informal/non-formal education endorses an understanding of education in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

The present analysis also highlights various dilemmas that merit further discussion and research. For example, in every country education policy discourse faces the question of segregation or separate education for certain groups, with debate as to when (and whether) certain groups should be educated separately, and when inclusive education is constructive. Another shared challenge is the role of education as a site of integration; in many countries, policy debates have faced the question of whether education is a tool for integration or

assimilation (and hence should be delivered in the national language), or whether minority students must have the right to an equal education in their own mother tongue, using their own curriculum. In the light of this, the language of instruction is then a contentious issue in several countries.

Yet another challenge has been the role of non-formal and informal education, as well as non-state actors, in mitigating educational inequalities. With the educational landscape becoming increasingly open to various non-state actors, such actors have become demonstrably more important players in educational provision, (re)setting educational agendas and (re)defining educational inequalities and ways to mitigate them. Despite the persistent state-centric language of policy documents, in most countries non-state actors – including religious groups, private foundations, or non-profit associations – are actively demonstrating their commitment to providing education and, in many instances, mitigating educational inequalities in cooperation with schools.

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