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LEARN Brief

Mapping the Education Evidence Base: Unlocking Opportunities to Reduce Educational Inequalities

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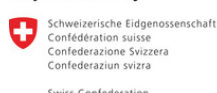
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ABOUT LEARN

The EU Horizon Project LEARN, a collaborative initiative led by the University of Helsinki, focuses on improving the use of evidence in educational policy and practice. Through a systematic meta-review of existing research, the project aims to identify gaps in the current understanding of socioeconomic disadvantages and educational inequalities affecting children, adolescents, and young adults (CAYA). The findings of this meta-review offer valuable insights into under-researched areas, highlighting opportunities for policymakers and researchers to drive progress in addressing educational inequalities. The results are presented in a detailed article, which can be accessed on the [EU LEARN website](#) and the [LEARN evidence platform](#) once publicly available.

ABOUT THIS META-REVIEW

A meta-review has selected the existing literature on educational inequality and socioeconomic disadvantage. This approach maps the breadth and scope of research across disciplines and offers a comprehensive view of the available evidence. Unlike more narrowly focused systematic reviews, the meta-review synthesises findings from diverse fields, including social sciences and humanities, allowing for an interdisciplinary perspective.

This meta-review targeted studies that examined the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and educational inequality. A total of 29 reviews, published between 2019 and 2024, were included, covering 1,950 empirical studies. This wide-ranging analysis provides a thorough exploration of the key issues, gaps, and trends in the research, helping to clarify the main concepts, highlighting areas in need of further investigation, and the scope of evidence for policy design.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Gaps in Educational Stage Coverage

A critical finding of the meta-review is the limited research focus on certain educational stages. While middle and secondary education receive considerable attention, primary and non-university tertiary education remain underrepresented. Addressing these overlooked stages is essential to fully understanding how inequalities develop early and persist into adulthood. Expanding research to include these critical phases will provide a more complete picture of the student journey, ensuring that policy interventions address inequality at all stages.

2. Narrow Focus on Family-Level Indicators

Current research tends to focus heavily on family-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage, such as parental education and income. This narrow scope overlooks broader contextual factors such as school environments, neighbourhood deprivation, and peer networks. Future research should include these broader socioeconomic contexts to generate more comprehensive insights. This approach would allow for more informed policy decisions, ensuring that interventions target individual and systemic contributors to inequality.

3. Underexplored Educational Outcomes

Most studies emphasise academic achievement (grades, test scores) and student engagement (aspirations, retention), leaving out broader educational outcomes such as cognitive ability, social mobility, and socioemotional development. Expanding the range of educational outcomes will enable policymakers to design more inclusive interventions that address diverse aspects of student development beyond easily measurable academic metrics.

4. Mismatch Between Theory and Indicators

The meta-review also reveals a mismatch between the rich theoretical frameworks used in educational inequality research and the limited, family-focused empirical indicators. While conceptual perspectives like capital accumulation theories and ecological systems frameworks highlight the importance of broader social contexts, most empirical studies do not reflect these insights. Aligning research indicators with theoretical frameworks would enhance the depth of understanding and lead to more effective policy solutions.

IMPLICATIONS THE OPPORTUNITY

This section outlines the main implications of these findings for the education evidence base, and the opportunities to build on, and drive forward the extension of evidence generation and the evaluation of existing evidence.

Policymakers should invest in research covering underrepresented educational stages, such as primary and non-university tertiary education. By focusing on these critical phases, interventions can be better timed and more effectively targeted to address inequalities that begin early and persist into later life stages.

Policy design should incorporate a broader range of socioeconomic indicators, including school SES, neighbourhood conditions, and peer networks. This expanded scope will provide a more holistic view of the factors influencing educational inequality and enable policies that address the full range of social contexts impacting student outcomes.

Policymakers need to broaden their focus beyond academic achievement to include outcomes such as cognitive development, social mobility, and socioemotional skills. This more inclusive approach will support the development of policies that foster all aspects of student success, leading to more equitable education systems.

Greater alignment between the theoretical frameworks used in educational inequality research and the indicators measured in empirical studies is crucial. Policymakers should promote research that reflects individual and broader contextual factors, ensuring that policy interventions are rooted in comprehensive, interdisciplinary evidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the main implications of these findings for the education evidence base, and the opportunities to build on, and drive forward the extension of evidence generation and the evaluation of existing evidence.

Understanding What Educational Evidence Measures—and What It Misses

1. For Future Research

1.1. Expand Research Across Educational Stages

Future research should address the gaps in primary and non-university tertiary education to ensure that all stages of the educational journey are adequately covered.

1.2. Broaden Socioeconomic Indicators

Researchers should incorporate broader social contexts, such as school environments and neighbourhood factors, to capture the full complexity of socioeconomic disadvantage

1.3. Adopt Interdisciplinary Approaches

By integrating insights from sociology, psychology, economics, and education, researchers can develop more holistic models of educational inequality, which in turn will lead to more robust and targeted policy interventions.

2. For policy makers and education experts

2.1. Address the Evidence Gaps in Educational Stages

Invest in rigorous evaluations of underrepresented educational stages, such as primary and non-university tertiary education, to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of where inequalities arise and persist.

2.2. Dedicate Resources for Systematic Review and Knowledge Sharing

Allocate sufficient resources to document, evaluate, and share insights from existing educational research, using a systematic monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approach.

2.3. Package and Disseminate Evidence to Address Gaps

Ensure that findings from reviews and research on educational inequality are packaged and shared to fill existing gaps. This should include operational insights on policy design and broader lessons on systemic impacts. Learning should be communicated through various formats—practical reports and academic publications—and translated into multiple languages to support regional policy communities globally.

2.4. Promote Flexibility in Policy Approaches

Be adaptive and responsive to emerging evidence, allowing for flexible policy design and implementation approaches that can evolve over time based on new insights.

2.5. Leverage Existing Evidence in Policy Design

Commit to integrating existing research evidence into policy and program design, ensuring that policies are rooted in the best available knowledge on educational inequality.

2.6. Strengthen Communication and Engagement Strategies

Invest in comprehensive communication and engagement strategies at both global and local levels to ensure that the findings from educational research contribute to the broader evidence-informed policy ecosystem, including sectors beyond education.

CONCLUSIONS

This policy brief outlines key opportunities to address educational inequality by expanding the current evidence base. The review exposes critical gaps in research, particularly in underrepresented educational stages and broader contextual indicators. Policymakers must act to close these gaps and ensure that all phases of the educational journey are covered.

It is essential to move beyond the narrow focus on family-level indicators and incorporate broader social contexts, such as school environments and neighbourhood conditions. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to inequality. Aligning theoretical frameworks with practical indicators will strengthen the foundation for more effective and targeted education policies.

The time is now for policymakers to leverage this existing knowledge. By taking decisive steps to bridge these research gaps, they can create stronger, more inclusive education systems that address inequalities at their root. The evidence is clear, and the path forward demands bold, strategic action to reshape the future of education.

We see a unique moment to bridge gaps in the evidence base and to promote policies that are not only informed by research but also capable of driving meaningful change in reducing educational inequalities.

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