
Socioeconomic inequalities and learning

Educational equality

Social barriers to education

Social demand for education

Social and economic inequalities have important and long-lasting effects on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development as well as on educational outcomes (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). Multiple inequities combine, producing a negative impact on the ability of marginalized children to learn (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, and Tseng, 2015). Thus the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children widens over time (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, and Tseng, 2015).

In contexts of high inequality, good quality and equitable education is key to the inclusive, peaceful, and sustained development of a society and a country. Ensuring the participation of marginalized groups and individuals in broader development processes helps reduce social inequalities. Inversely, unless attention is paid to equitable access, learning opportunities, and quality learning outcomes, education can entrench existing inequalities or create new ones.

Socioeconomic inequalities and education in the 2030 Agenda

- **Leaving no one behind.** The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development regards equity as central to achieving sustainable development and calls for leaving no one behind. This means including all vulnerable countries and ensuring all people, regardless of their background, have the right to fulfill their potential and to lead decent, dignified, and rewarding lives in a healthy environment. Sustainable development goal (SDG) 10 is specifically dedicated to reducing inequality, with a focus that goes far beyond economic inequality: 'By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status' (SDG10.2) (United Nations, 2015).
- **Addressing inequalities in education at the core of SDG 4.** SDG 4 stresses the need to combat all forms of exclusion and inequalities relating to access to education and learning processes. This requires refocused efforts to improve learning outcomes for the full life cycle, especially for women, girls, and marginalized people in vulnerable settings. Equity is all-inclusive within SDG 4 ('all girls and boys', with all indicators disaggregated by sex) but is also the focus of a specific target (SDG 4.5): 'By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations' (United Nations, 2015).

How socioeconomic inequalities affect learning

Whereas wide disparities exist across countries, this brief focuses on socioeconomic inequalities between groups or individuals within countries. It is important to understand who is vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion and how different types of exclusion affect learning.

Exclusion is contextual and influenced by supply- and demand-side barriers that prevent children and young people from enrolling and/or succeeding at school. Exclusion can occur:

- at the *individual level*, based on socioeconomic status (poverty or low levels of parental education), location of residence (rural vs. urban, regional disparities), or other vulnerabilities;
- at the *group level* (marginalized ethnic or linguistic groups, nomadic or indigenous peoples, gender or socio-cultural and religious factors, or migration status); or
- as the result of environmental and contextual factors, such as state fragility, conflict, or natural disaster that often lead to displacement.

Factors of exclusion

- **Poverty.** Children from poor families are less likely to meet the basic pre-requisites for learning and are often ill-prepared to attend school. Children who live in low-resourced communities are more likely to be malnourished, to have absent parents, and to be exposed to violence and stress. Their schools may receive less funding. These factors often lead to poor outcomes (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). School attendance may be affected by the need to work to contribute to family finances and by difficulties with paying school fees and other costs.
- **Parental education and literacy.** The home environment plays a critical role in children's development and early learning (Save the Children, 2018). Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that children of parents with high socioeconomic status demonstrated higher reading literacy than children of parents with low socioeconomic status (Xin Ma, 2008). Findings from the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) show that students achieve higher when their parents believe they will reach higher education (UNESCO Santiago, 2015). Inequities in parents' level of education can significantly affect children's ability to benefit from formal schooling. Parents who have not attended school, or who are illiterate, may avoid engaging in homework activities with their children or interacting with teachers and other service providers (Eccles, 2005; Tusiime et al., 2014). They may be unable to provide access to books and other literacy materials.
- **Location of residence.** Most countries have regionally unequal conditions of economic development, funding, and social services, as well as significant rural-urban divides. Schools in low-resourced areas – including rural areas and informal urban settlements – often receive less funding than schools in high-resourced areas. This results in reduced access to early childhood centres, high-quality schools, and well-trained teachers. This, in turn, results in lower literacy rates, poor academic performance, and higher drop-out rates, ultimately contributing to the cycle of poverty (Hindle, 2007). According to a 2018 UNICEF report, the poorest urban children in 1 in 6 countries are less likely to complete primary school than their counterparts in rural areas (UNICEF, 2018).
- **Gender.** In many countries, girls have less access to schools than boys and are more likely to drop out early. Factors may include practical matters, such as distance, safety, adequate facilities, etc. as well as expectations regarding participation in household chores, child

marriage practices, etc., and limited opportunities for girls' employment after school (GEM Report, 2016; Rihani, 2006; UNESCO, 2012). In some countries boys may drop out of school or underperform because of pressures to earn money or because school is deemed irrelevant (GEM Report, 2016). In school, teaching practices or instructional materials may contain gender stereotyping (Rihani, 2006), and students may face school-related gender-based violence that severely impedes their learning.

- **Sexual orientation and gender identity.** Bullying, violence, and other mistreatment is often compounded for LGBTI or gender non-conforming children and young people (UNESCO Bangkok, 2015), and has a significant educational impact. They may miss classes, avoid school activities, or drop out of school altogether. International learning assessments show that bullying reduces students' achievements in key subjects such as mathematics (UNESCO, 2017b).
- **Ethnicity, religion, and culture.** Children who face direct and indirect discrimination based on their ethnicity, religion, or culture may suffer from negative psychological and physical effects from an early age (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). This may cause them to underperform or struggle to learn.
- **Language.** International surveys regularly show that speaking a language in the home other than the language of instruction at school amounts to a handicap (Duru-Bellat, 2004), which leads to a greater risk of grade repetition and drop out (Pinnock, 2009).
- **Conflicts, crises, disasters, and displacement.** The experience of conflicts, crises, and disasters can leave children physically and emotionally traumatized. Migrant and refugee or displaced children may not have the formal residence papers allowing them to attend school or may face hostility and prejudice in school. Due to damage and/or insecurity, children may not have access to school buildings, learning materials, or qualified teachers (GEM Report, 2018b; IIEP-UNESCO, 2011).

Policy and planning responses

Education policies are among the most powerful levers to reduce income disparities. 'In countries with currently low levels of education attainment, policies that promote equal access to basic education could help reduce inequality by facilitating the accumulation of human capital, and making educational opportunities less dependent on socio-economic circumstances' (Brueckner, Dabla-Norris and Gradstein, 2014: 19). Education policies need to be inclusive, with the principle of equity being fundamental to all education sector plans and policies (UNESCO, 2017a). In addition, targeted policies to address specific instances of exclusion should be introduced.

Pro-poor education policies

Inequities can be addressed, and learning outcomes improved, when governments ensure that the most disadvantaged children and their families have access to quality education services in the formative years (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012).

Policy-makers should provide fair funding and special assistance to the lowest-performing schools and students, and implement school-community partnerships. They should identify priority education zones to compensate for regional funding disparities, and allocate resources based on specific criteria (e.g. percentage of children of foreign origin or whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction). (Duru-Bellat, 2004).

Pro-poor education policies that promote equal access to basic education, such as cash transfers to

encourage attendance or spending on public education that benefits the poor, can reduce inequality by helping build human capital and making educational opportunities less dependent on socioeconomic circumstances (WEF, 2014).

Extending access to private schools through vouchers to reduce segregation has been implemented in some countries, with mixed results.

Targeted policies to address specific dimensions of exclusion

Education planners may also ensure targeted support for population groups faced with specific types of discrimination.

- **Early childhood education policies** should target the most disadvantaged children before they enter school.
- **Language/bilingual education policies** may help improve the educational outcomes of children whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction.
- **Inclusive school curricula and [teaching and learning materials](#)** can help reduce discrimination (e.g. providing age-appropriate information on sexual health, including information on sexual and gender diversity, can help address bullying).
- **ICT policies** can provide the tools to help close the educational divide and make classrooms an inclusive place for all (UNESCO, 2011).
- **Policies to combat bullying based on gender and sexual identity** can help schools establish relevant mechanisms and reporting requirements, and outline sanctions for non-compliance. For example, the Philippines 2013 Anti-Bullying Act provides the framework for national awareness-raising initiatives and school policies (UNESCO Bangkok, 2018).
- **Moving to later tracking** can ensure that all students get a broad education. Later tracking is associated with better outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, who are more likely to otherwise be directed into vocational education (Blanden and McNally, 2014).
- **Affirmative action policies** encourage and train people from under-represented groups to help them overcome disadvantages in competing with others, particularly in higher education. The benefits are widely recognized, but each country takes a different approach (e.g. Sweden pays special attention to gender, India to caste, and Sri Lanka to the district of origin) (GEM Report, 2018a).
- **Crisis-sensitive education sector plans and policies** can build resilient systems, help prepare for potential disasters or conflict, and provide equitable access to schooling in crisis- and conflict-affected areas.
- **Non-formal or alternative education policies** may target children and young people who are outside the formal school system. Adapted curricula and methods can reconnect young people to education or provide them with the skills needed to enter the world of work: 'Non-formal education ... can play a crucial role in providing second-chance education for out-of-school children ... [as long as] such educational opportunities provide a recognized pathway into the formal system' (UIS and UNICEF, 2015: 41).

The need for holistic and cross-sectoral policies

Policy-makers and planners need to investigate other ways to mitigate the impact of inequities on learning outcomes, including health interventions, parenting and community support, and employment policies. Targeting families and communities is particularly important as educational outcomes are shaped much more by the family than by the school. Families are responsible for the

initial socialization of their children and for nurturing their educational aspirations (Duru-Bellat, 2004).

Social inequities may also be addressed through wider policies to fight racism and discrimination, strategies for welcoming refugees and migrants into communities, and child-friendly spaces for children who have experienced trauma. Due to the interconnected and cumulative nature of most social inequities, working both outside and inside schools is the best way to ensure that all children meet their learning potential (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, and Tseng, 2015).

Plans and policies

- El Salvador: [Política de equidad e igualdad de género](#) (2019)
- Malta: [Trans, gender variant and intersex students in schools: policy](#) (2015)
- South Africa: [Rural education draft policy](#) (2017)

Tools

- Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2012. '[Chronic Poverty and Education: A guide to what works in policy and practice](#)'. Education Policy Guide.
- Education for All Fast Track Initiative Secretariat, EFA-FTI; United Nations. 2010. [Equity and inclusion in education: A guide to support education sector plan preparation, revision, and appraisal](#). Washington, D.C.: EFA-FTI Secretariat.
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