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Abstract

Although a number of policies tackling educational inequalities have been introduced in recent decades in Europe, educational inequalities exist to a varying extent both in different sub- and supranational contexts. In this article, we address the link between social and educational policies with respect to educational inequalities. Educational policies aim to guarantee opportunities throughout educational trajectories and beyond. They pertain to all areas and the entire duration of the human life. Our contribution to socialpolicy.ch introduces the ongoing Horizon 2020 project PIONEERED on educational inequalities by elaborating on the social problems behind those disparities, and by outlining the project's conceptual and methodological approaches that join together multilevel, intersectional and life-course perspectives.

Keywords:
social policies; educational policies; education; inequalities; research design

Introduction[2]

While in many academic disciplinary discourses, social and educational policies are still treated separately across many countries, and different ministerial entities govern both policy fields, there is an increasing awareness that social and educational policies are linked to each other. For example, while the German tradition of social policy research largely ignored education as part of social policies, the Anglo-Saxon approaches often considered education an integral part of social policies (Rudloff 2007). The idea of the interrelatedness of both spheres becomes par-

ticularly obvious when considering debates on inequalities in access to education, the opportunities existing within education systems, and the outcomes of schooling such as educational credentials or merits. Today, there exists a widespread understanding that social and economic prosperity are strongly related to education. This is reflected in publications of supranational institutions, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), which highlight the importance of investments in early education: "Countries need to pay better attention to the lives of their children for the sake of their economies and their societies" (OECD 2009: 14). In the same vein, Esping-Andersen et al. (2001: 3) argue in a report to the EU presidency:

> It is in childhood that the foundations of citizens' life chances are laid. A good life in the future will require far greater resources and competencies and we therefore advocate a comprehensive social investment strategy in favour of children and families with children.

The central role of educational professionals, institutions and policies on individual lives and society has been emphasised in a variety of ways. In broad practical social policy issues and challenges, educational institutions and educational professionals are often asked to help, support and fix the challenges. Nevertheless, a deeper analysis and understanding of their role remains scarce. Educational research has intensified since the 2000s, particularly after the first OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies revealed pronounced shortcomings in contemporary Western education systems, namely a systematic lack of skills among certain student groups, such as underprivileged or immigrant students. These stark inequalities indicate that there are unused skill resources that should be better developed.

However, the sole focus on measurable and unused competencies not only narrows the view of educational practice, but also undermines the importance of education for the development of society and the individual (Apple 2000, 2001; Radtke 2003; Jobst 2013). In this sense, educational research furthermore points to the strong link between participation in education and life chances such as income, health, political participation or well-being. Therefore, transferring the theme of a volume edited by Opielka (2005) titled *Educational Reform as Social Reform*, we claim that educational policies are social policies. This assertion is also expressed by Platt (2021: 1) in her definition of social policy, explicitly mentioning education as one human:

> Social policy is concerned with the ways societies across the world meet human needs for security, education, work, health and well-being. Social policy addresses how states and societies respond to global challenges of social, demographic and economic change, and of poverty, migration and globalisation.

However, much of the debate within social sciences still follows the logic of a dichotomy between educational and social policies (Allmendinger 1999; Rudloff 2007), focusing on either the educational or the social sphere. From this perspective, educational policies often define education in terms of skill formation that happens within the time span of the first 15–20 years of one's life. Afterwards, social policy takes over to address the remaining lifespan. In contrast to this view, we argue that educational and social policies are linked, potentially covering the entire lifespan. Moreover, we emphasise that educational policies constitute a crucial part of social policy.

Starting from how social policies and educational inequalities are interrelated, the ongoing Horizon 2020 research project *PIONEERED: Pioneering Policies and Practices Tackling Educational Inequalities in Europe* casts light on persisting educational inequalities in Europe and assesses the potential impact of its findings for society and social policy research.

The linkage between educational and social policies

Recognising that educational and social policies are conceptually and empirically linked, the PIONEERED project employs this perspective in research practices that intend to identify and analyse pioneering policies and practices to mitigate inequalities in access to, uptake and completion of education, both in formal and informal educational settings.

Conceptually, linking educational and social policies is crucial, particularly in a life-course perspective (Elder 1995; Mayer 2002). Considering the idea of path dependency, earlier and later stages in life are strongly related, such as education and socialisation during childhood and youth, labour market and life chances. Another core idea of the life-course approach relates to interdependencies between different fields, such as education, family, labour market – again backing the idea of strong linkages between the educational and the social. These links are also stressed from another conceptual perspective, namely social innovation research (Bund, Gerhard, Hoelscher, and Mildenberger 2015; Pelka and Terstriep 2016): education plays a key role in social integration in general, and innovations in particular.

In the following, we elaborate on different notions regarding the relation between educational and social policies. For a long time, research in these two areas existed firmly separate from each other. A major reason for this may be a low linkage between educational and social policies that Allmendinger and Leibfried (2005) detected for Germany, while in an earlier analysis Allmendinger (1999) concluded an even lower linkage between education and social policies for the United States. A significant driver for this lack of connection may be the division of labour between national and sub-national administrations dealing with education and social policies. In the German case, the governance regarding social policies centres on a national/federal ministry, while educational policies are administered by sub-national ministries of education (Allmendinger and Leibfried 2005). In the Nordic countries, however, educational and social policies are more strongly linked, even on the level of the national governments (Aasen 2003; Helgøy and Homme 2006, 2016).

Similarities and differences between educational and social policies are elaborated by Allmendinger (1999) in an article on the linkage between both spheres that has gained much attention and has been taken up by many researchers to deal with the issue of *educational poverty* (Gross and Hadjar 2014). Providing an example for the notion of a clear separation between educational and social policies, Allmendinger (1999) references Marshall (1992) with his argument that educational policies aim at changing individual (labour) market chances, while social policies aim at influencing market outcomes reactively (e.g. labour market chances, income/poverty). However, Allmendinger (1999) indicates a much stronger linkage between educational and social policies and focuses on the following arguments.

First, at least in the modern European welfare state, educational and social policies have similar functions in the genesis and the legitimation of citizenship and related citizen rights/civil rights. Examples relate to Dahrendorf (1965), who proclaimed education as a civil right in the 1960s' debate on Germany's shortage of skill resources. Debates on civil rights, democratic and economic participation of disadvantaged social strata went hand in hand with the *Sputnik crisis* when the West appeared to have fallen behind in the advancement of technology after the Soviet Union had launched the first artificial satellite in 1957. These debates laid the foundations for educational reforms and the twentieth-century educational expansion in most European countries, but with regional differences (Hadjar and Becker 2009; Breen, Luijkx, Müller, and Pollak 2010). Countries such as Austria, Germany, Luxembourg or Switzerland increased educational opportunities while sticking to their stratified education systems. At the same time, the Nordic countries like the young nation of Finland developed into egalitarian societies during the 1950s after turbulent war times, and promoted comprehensive education; guaranteeing equal education for all children became one of the key policy drivers (e.g. Niemi 2016).

Second, both educational and social policies affect status attainment and status maintenance. Traditionally, educational policies more strongly relate to status attainment processes, as education is perceived as the major requirement for a successful entry into the labour market and affects income and positioning. From this traditional perspective, the role of social policies is to fix failures in status attainment or losses in the positioning on the labour market and disadvantages in life chances beyond these issues (e.g. illness, disability). As Allmendinger (1999) notes, there is more overlap between these functions than a traditional perspective would suggest, since educational policies impact life chances through education, and social policies increasingly include the element of lifelong education. Furthermore, according to developmental theories, education enables individuals to qualify, to commit, to consume, to actively participate in society and thus influences individuals throughout the life course (Hurrelmann and Quenzel 2015).

Third, traditionally, educational policies were seen as prevention instruments (e.g. to prevent *educational poverty* and related lack of labour market and life chances), while social policies were perceived as instruments to compensate for such lacks. Again, Allmendinger (1999) also detects an increasing mix-up between both policy spheres, as the idea of lifelong qualification became an essential part of social policy measures (e.g. concerning unemployment measures), while social policy measures also become crucial for certain life-course sequences between educational stages (e.g. between secondary education and vocational education or tertiary education; or with regard to second-chance education).

Fourth, for a long time, it was plausible that educational policies would link to early phases in the life course (e.g. childhood, youth) and social policies to later phases. However, this order became more fluid, as individual life paths are increasingly characterised by a mix-up between phases of education and labour force participation, while social policy measures increasingly address issues in the earlier developmental stages like, for example, child poverty. In contrast, educational policies are involved more frequently in adult stages of life through, for example, the provision of lifelong learning opportunities (Allmendinger 1999).

Treating educational and social policies as two different spheres, a comparative study by Hega and Hokenmeier (2002) provides insight into the relationship between both spheres and

related systems. The researchers followed a trade-off thesis, assuming that (n)either the education system (n)or the social system would function as a great equaliser (Heidenheimer 1981). Based on this argument, the starting point of Hega and Hokenmeier (2002: 3) is that for a long time, a "trade-off took place between public investment in educational opportunities at the post-primary level and social insurance programs". While their findings indicate that countries seem to balance educational policies targeted at providing equal opportunities in skill formation, and social policies targeting the equal provision of welfare to individuals after the primary education phases, they show a strong linkage between welfare state regime and educational policies. There seems to be a profound correlation between the welfare state regime type (Esping-Andersen 1990) and educational policies with more equal education systems going along with more equal welfare state regimes. Recent studies on education systems show that the Nordic countries with the least inequality-prone welfare state regime also inhibit the least inequality-prone education systems centring on comprehensive secondary schooling characterised by a low stratification/low external differentiation level, although even in the Nordic countries inequalities related to economic differences are still observable (van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010; Hadjar and Gross 2016; Knudsen 2021). Furthermore, it is shown that an increase in educational opportunities does not automatically lead to increased opportunities in the labour market and economic wealth (Wiborg and Hansen 2018). In fact, education policy often acts as a promotor of problems and paradoxes in educational practices (Jobst 2013).

All of this leaves us wondering how the cycle of reproduction of social inequality within a society can be interrupted. In the 1960s, education was perceived as a key solution, as it shapes life chances via (at least) three different aspects: education – not only in formal institutional settings – means knowledge and skills; it is an instrument for status attainment and income; and it also relates to certain socialisation environments shaping behaviour and lifestyles. Educational policies were supposed to facilitate the uptake of education throughout the life course and show positive effects on society. In fact, research on the educational expansion showed that an increase in educational opportunities in upper-secondary general and vocational as well as higher education led to better societal health levels and a longer average lifetime expectancy as well as economic prosperity and a higher societal political participation, but at the same time did not reduce inequalities to the expected extent (Hannum and Buchmann 2005; Hadjar and Becker 2009; Hadjar 2019). From a political science point of view, a central strategy for the interruption of reproduction is a better cooperation between the political fields based on a holistic approach to combatting social inequality (Larsen, Holsen, and Urke 2020). Following our core argument, the solution is to look at educational policies through the lens of social policy.

For all these reasons, educational policies are social policies – and even if it does make sense to differentiate between the two, they are strongly linked to each other. Taking up the notion of the final chapter of Opielka (2005), a strong linkage between educational policies and social policies and a coordination between the two, with maybe even a common governance by a joint administration, could be a desired step towards the future.

PIONEERED – researching policies and practices to tackle educational inequalities from a multilevel, intersectional, and life-course perspective (MILC)

In 2019 and 2020, an international research team, coordinated by two Luxembourgish academic organisations – the University of Luxembourg and the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) – prepared a project proposal for a Research and Innovation Action Project in response to the European Commission's H2020 Call *Enhancing Access and Uptake of Education to Reverse Inequalities* (TRANSFORMATIONS-22-2020), the latter aiming at promoting equality in Europe. The project PIONEERED – *Pioneering Policies and Practices Tackling Educational Inequalities in Europe* was retained for funding by the European Commission in late 2020 and runs from March 2021 until the end of February 2024. In the following, we outline the background, objectives, conceptual framework, and methodological approaches to assess the potential contribution of the project to social policies.[3]

Background

Educational inequalities, defined as systematic variations in access to and uptake of education associated with (but not causally attributed to) individual characteristics, such as social background, gender, disability, or immigrant background, as well as the intersections between these axes (e.g. working-class boys), still persist in most European education systems. They are perceived as a social problem overall, as such inequalities are coined by disadvantages of certain groups (e.g. working class, certain immigrant groups) in aspects of formal and informal education (learning processes, skills and competencies, school marks/grades, certificates and degrees), and non-cognitive educational aspects (attitudes and values towards education, well-being in school, motivation; cf. Hadjar and Gross 2016). Educational inequalities are not static, finite outcomes in terms of single one-time events during a life course, but relate to processes characterised by the accumulation of events of unequal (or even equal) treatment and the resources linked to this (Skrobanek and Karl 2016). As indicated in the definition, individual differences in the uptake of education are hardly explained by a learner's talent and effort only, but are structured by ascriptive often intersecting characteristics (e.g. gender, social and ethnic/migration background) regarding axes of inequality (e.g. male migrant students).

As a reduction in educational inequalities would contribute to the raising of educational levels among individuals (belonging to disadvantaged groups) and the society as a whole, the improvement of individual life chances and the overall socio-economic and political sustainability of Europe might be a core aim of social policies. As early as the 1960s, some policies, introduced after the *Sputnik shock* in many European countries, including social policies, addressed an increased access to education. While in some countries (such as Switzerland) these reforms targeted economic prosperity rather than equality, others (such as the Nordic countries) accentuated the aspect of equal rights, but also equal access and - even more radically - equal outcome

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(Repstad 2005). Approaches in the different countries vary, however. While northern European countries favour a comprehensive schooling approach, central European countries such as Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria have a long tradition of segmentation, tracking students into differential school settings to facilitate the uptake of education (Hadjar and Gross 2016). Despite these attempts to increase the uptake of education and to reduce inequalities, they still persist in the twenty-first century (e.g. Breen, Luijkx, Müller, and Pollak 2010).

As one of many examples, the impact of the socio-economic status (SES) of the families of secondary-school students on the competencies in science measured within the OECD PISA 2015 study, explains some part of the variation in science competencies in all countries. There are similar results for economic, social and cultural status (ESCS): even in the most educationally equal European nation of Iceland, 4.9 per cent of individual differences in science competencies of students stem from their socio-economic and cultural family background (Estonia 7.8%, Norway 8.2%, Finland 10%), while in the least educationally equal countries, the impact of ESCS on science competencies rises to 20.3 per cent in France, 20.8 per cent in Luxembourg and 21.4 per cent in Hungary (Reiss, Sälzer, Schiepe-Tiska, Klieme, and Köller, 2016: 296). In the OECD PISA 2018 study, competencies were still strongly linked to ESCS, ranging from 6.2 per cent explained differences in reading competencies in Estonia and up to 19.1 per cent in Hungary (OECD 2019: 17). Importantly, there are also persisting gender disparities in competencies that differ by country. Female students outperform male students in reading competencies. In European countries, the respective gender gap ranges from 20 PISA points (theoretical PISA mean score: 500) in the UK to 52 points in Finland (OECD 2019: 25–26) in favour of female students. However, in mathematics and science the gap is reversed to a male advantage. Female students report lower levels of confidence in these subjects and remain persistently under-represented in Science/Technology/Engineering/Mathematics (STEM) education and careers. While these examples relate to competencies, there are also educational inequalities regarding certificates and early school leaving (Lavrijsen and Nicaise 2015; Hadjar and Gross 2016). Educational trajectories differ between socio-economically privileged and disadvantaged students, girls/women and boys/men, immigrant and language groups (Backes and Hadjar 2017). While a great deal of research has been dedicated to educational inequalities and this has (partly) informed educational policies, innovative research approaches are needed to find ways to reduce educational inequalities more effectively. This should also involve more integrative research approaches that are based on a comprehensive understanding of education and recognise the dynamics of educational practices within and outside educational organisations for identifying appropriate ways, strategies and methods for tackling educational inequalities.

Objectives

The project PIONEERED is based on the reflections above, which can briefly be summarised as follows: the educational sphere is strongly interlaced with the social sphere, and educational policies and social policies are in fact strongly interlinked, although some idiosyncratic discourses cultivate artificial system/institutional differences. Educational inequalities are a prod-

uct of the interplay of macro, meso and micro factors, and should be considered from a longitudinal perspective. Thus, PIONEERED prevents ecological and temporal fallacies, as in public and, in some arenas, even scientific discourses, inequalities are often understood as something associated with or based on *individual characteristics*. Conversely, multifaceted time and space-specific embeddedness in institutions and broader social-cultural contexts is, in PIONEERED, understood to play a central role in defining and *empowering* or *depowering* the named (social) characteristics.

The overarching goals of the project are to determine research-informed policy measures and identify policies and practices to enhance access to, uptake and completion of education, both aimed at mitigating educational inequalities. Identifying pioneering practices rather than the best practices takes into account the diversity of inequalities, countries, educational stages and involved actors and the need for customised solutions.

The project seeks to provide a holistic picture regarding possible solutions to tackle educational inequalities. It links the educational and the social spheres and focuses on different analysis levels: individuals (micro level; e.g. parental decisions, students' attitudes and behaviours); institutions (meso level; e.g. school structures, transition rules); and society (macro level; e.g. educational and social policies).

Linking the educational and social spheres and considering different levels of analysis – as outlined above – the three overarching objectives include:

(1) *Mapping existing and emerging sources of educational inequalities over the course of educational careers from early childhood to tertiary education.* This objective relates to questions such as: how do educational inequalities – as conditioned by individual characteristics such as gender, social and migration background and ethnicity, disability, geographical location and their intersections – emerge, develop, accumulate or diminish over successive educational stages? How do educational practices and institutional features shape (intersectional) educational inequalities in classrooms and schools? How are educational inequalities affected by policies and reforms implemented in different countries relating to different levels of the education sector? How does the interplay between informal and formal education impact (intersectional) educational inequalities?

(2) *Mapping responses to inequalities in terms of pioneering policies and practices in formal and informal settings from a comparative perspective.* This objective relates to questions such as: how are inequalities tackled and possibly reduced by policies at the societal level (education system, social and welfare protection, family policy), and by residential and geographic specificities on other policy levels? How are inequalities addressed by implementing innovative institutional settings (e.g. school structures) and (pedagogical) practices relating to instruction (e.g. digital tools), classroom management, inclusion (e.g. of students with disabilities, language and migration background) and student assessment at school and classroom levels? How do teachers, other educators and related professions (e.g. special education teachers, school psychologists, support educators, school nurses etc.) deal with disparities in motivation, learning and social behaviour in the classroom, which inequality axes do they address, and if so how do they attempt to tackle inequalities? How do informal educational practices contribute to reducing educational inequalities?

(3) *Triangulating results and selecting the most promising tools, pioneering policies and practices within and across European countries.* This objective relates to questions such as: what methodological features appear to be meaningful to identifying pioneering practices? Which successful pioneering strategies and policies can be detected within and across European countries, merging and triangulating the different results?

All in all, PIONEERED aims at providing policy and practice recommendations to successfully reduce inequalities at different stages of education – early-childhood education and care (ECEC), compulsory (primary and lower secondary), upper-secondary general and vocational, as well as tertiary education. Special attention is drawn towards students from vulnerable groups who are perceived as *being at risk* of leaving school early, and future unemployment.

Conceptual background

At the beginning, we described shortcomings and pitfalls of contemporary debates on educational inequalities. Taking this as the starting point, the theoretical framework of PIONEERED brings certain key approaches together that have a range of methodological implications, and that eventually help to employ a more holistic perspective.

General explanations of educational inequalities

While PIONEERED follows an open approach to identify the multiplicity of drivers of inequality and their roles at different stages of education, it starts out from two major frameworks on educational inequalities by Boudon (1974) and Bourdieu (1986). These have been selected, as they are classical approaches being frequently employed in quantitative (mainly the first, less often the latter) and qualitative research (the latter). However, the PIONEERED conceptual framework is open and allows for additional conceptual frameworks, such as agency approaches (Schlimbach, Skrobanek, Kmiotek-Meier, and Vysotskaya 2019).

A classical concept in the study of educational inequalities is the general conceptual framework of Boudon (1974) on primary and secondary effects of social origin. Primary effects refer to differences in educational achievement structured by social origin, and secondary effects relate to social background-specific educational decisions at certain points of educational transitions (e.g. from lower-secondary school to an upper-secondary school track, from upper-secondary education to tertiary education). The latter are based on cost–benefit evaluations against a background of resources and constraints (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Becker 2003). The concept of primary and secondary effects can also be applied to gender (Becker 2014; Hadjar, Krolak-Schwerdt, Priem, and Glock 2014), ethnic inequalities (van de Werfhorst and van Tubergen 2007; Kristen, Reimer, and Kogan 2008), or the intersection between gender and ethnicity (Fleischmann, Kristen, Heath, Brinbaum, Deboosere, Granato, Jonsson, Kilpi-Jakonen, Lorenz, Lutz, Mos, Mutarrak, Phalet, Rothon, Rudolphi, and van de Werfhorst 2014; Dollmann 2017). The concept can be applied to currently under-researched axes of inequalities, such as disability (Powell 2010). A major recent extension of the Boudon model relates to tertiary effects (Blossfeld, P.N., Blossfeld, G.J., and Blossfeld, H.-P. 2015; Esser 2016), namely the stereotype-biased expectations, efforts, evaluations and decisions (e.g. track recommendation) of the teachers who treat students differently in school. Research showed that teachers have stereotypes

regarding gender, migration background, social background and special educational needs/disability (e.g. Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, and Pit-ten Cate 2015; Krischler, Powell, and Pit-ten Cate 2019). All in all, according to this approach, the lower educational attainment of disadvantaged groups is explained by their lower achievement (primary effects), their lower educational aspirations and educational decisions in favour of less demanding and shorter educational pathways (secondary effects), and their differential treatment by teachers (tertiary effects) vis-à-vis an actual or perceived lack of resources.

Bourdieu's explanatory approach refers to group-specific resources (e.g. capital), however, in a broader socio-critical perspective with a focus on socialization processes (e.g. habitus), symbolic power relations and processes of institutional selection. In particular, the general principle of formal equality serves to legitimize processes of exclusion in a school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). It is "… a cloak for and a justification of indifference to the real inequalities with regard to the body of knowledge taught or rather demanded" (Bourdieu 1974: 38). That means, the learning of educational content in schools presupposes that the tools for learning – for example, an elaborate language or high educational aspirations – have already been acquired (e.g. in the family). Students also need access to capital resources that facilitate learning processes: cultural capital (e.g. books at home, literate parents); social capital (e.g. relatives and peers that support home tasks); and economic capital (e.g. to pay for additional lessons and learning materials). There is no such thing as the mutual approval of diverse life practices, habitus or cultural capital within schools, but the uptake of education very much depends on the cultural distance between the students and the demands of the educational organisations. In this sense, educational institutions, their preferred educational practices or the types of knowledge, are seen as places "of crucial struggles about the meaning of democracy, about definitions of legitimate culture, and about who should benefit the most from government policies and practices" (Apple 1999: 13).

This argument is underlined by applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus, defined as a system of durable embodied attitudes and values towards education (dispositions) and behavioural patterns (practices) that are socialised in families, but also in other contexts such as the peer group, and which serve to generate further practice. Schools have certain demands regarding student habitus. Some groups (such as working class and boys) are further from the demands of actors within educational settings than other groups. A lack of fit between one's own habitus and these demands decreases educational opportunities (Helsper, Kramer, Thiersch, and Ziems 2009). Within habitus theory, the stereotype-biased assessments of the teacher on which Boudon focused (tertiary effects) are interpreted differently. The teachers embody a social group whose practices reproduce social structures and cultural meanings on the one hand. As Bourdieu lined out (1996: 279), the social structure and history is incorporated in the (teacher's) habitus. On the other hand, for reasons of case dynamics within the school and of social change, teachers are constantly reformulating and developing the practice-relevant worlds of meaning, including the context, and developing them further. In this sense, the teacher's habitus is a practice generating principle that enables the teacher to generate new (pioneering) practices (Jobst 2010: 113, Hestholm and Jobst 2020). With this, Bourdieu's theory challenges the deficit perspective and points out that the dynamics and autonomy of praxis as well as the cultural capital or habitus – which is not recognised in the institutional context – constitutes a resource for the transformation of habitus and society (Jobst and Skrobanek 2020).

Life-course perspective and multilevel framework

Educational advantages and disadvantages are likely to cumulate throughout the life course, from pre-schooling, primary schooling and (general and vocational) secondary schooling up to tertiary education, and educational shortcomings translate into reduced life chances beyond the core educational phase (DiPrete and Eirich 2006). While much of the previous work on educational opportunities has tended to focus on particular individual transitions (from elementary school to differentiated tracks, from compulsory schooling to further education or vocational training, as well as the anticipated transition from school to employment), a life-course approach captures cumulative transitions and the trajectories these transitions constitute. Educational inequality – as well as equality – is not a single one-time event in life, but rather a process characterised by an accumulation of events of unequal or equal treatment. Elder's (1995) life-course approach implies carefully considering the structural context (time and place) and individual characteristics and actions (human agency and self-regulation). PIONEERED, therefore, conceptualises the production, reproduction or reduction of educational inequality as a dynamic open ecological process, which is shaped by the interlacement of structure and individual action over the life course (Skrobanek and Karl 2016) and "takes into account situational and personal conditions, its variations over time and the reciprocal relation/interrelatedness between the levels in temporality" (Skrobanek and Jobst 2019: 316). Accordingly, PIONEERED focuses on how practices and policies structure the timing, duration and sequence of activities and events in a person's lifetime (Mayer 2002: 2), all of which are closely linked to cumulative advantages and disadvantages (DiPrete and Eirich 2006). Life courses are shaped through various simultaneous mechanisms that are linked to institutions, individual trajectories and the collective patterning of life chances. The concept of the life course (Mayer and Müller 1986; Mayer 2002, 2009) is key to apprehending differentials in the social structure of life courses. This means investigating the chances offered over the life course of different groups who share the same contextual setting, but potentially face very different structures of opportunity and constraint. In capturing the dynamic aspect of agency, the life-course approach is particularly apposite for researching the practices, experiences and outcomes at different stages (Wingens, Windzio, Valk, and Aybek 2011), with recent applications, for instance, to investigate educational attainment, work careers, family formation, occupational mobility and labour market integration. In addition to the situational, personal and contextual conditions, life-course trajectories are moulded by earlier resources and experiences (Mayer 2002). Considering the connection between policies and institutional features with individual educational trajectories, it is important to consider educational processes beyond political goals and programmes. In this sense, the political action must be distinguished from its effect (Mayntz 2009; Jobst 2013).

Educational systems offer different opportunity structures (e.g. inclusive learning settings versus segmented learning settings) for heterogeneous groups of children (with special educational needs/disabilities, with a foreign background, and with a lower socio-economic background) to catch up with their peers during primary school. Yet, these children might not reach these milestones by the end of primary school, when (early) tracking (differentiation) takes place in some countries. Educational inequalities arise at this stage, on the one hand due to unequal skills and competence attainment processes at the individual level; on the other, they

are a result of institutional framework conditions, with the role of teachers and in-class processes in the foreground. Previous studies demonstrated that systematic bias occurs when teachers underestimate or overestimate future performance of children depending on ascriptive characteristics of the latter (Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, and Pit-ten Cate 2015; Lorenz, Gentrup, Kristen, Stanat, and Kogan 2016). This implies a need for certain policies that go beyond standardisation and supporting teachers and schools in designing and implementing customised solutions for addressing student needs. Otherwise, secondary and further stages of education will hardly compensate for existing inequalities.

As indicated in this paragraph, a life-course perspective always implies a multilevel framework, as individual life courses (micro level) are shaped by institutions (meso level) and conditions (e.g. policies, climates) in the society (macro level). A common framework is provided by the well-employed structural-individualistic, explanatory schema of Coleman (1986, 1990) with its main idea that macro-level phenomena and associations (such as educational expansion; Hadjar and Becker 2009) always need to be analysed considering meso-level and micro-level mechanisms.

Intersectionalities approach

The Horizon 2020 call explicitly focused on intersectional inequalities. This adds another key conceptual approach to the framework that is highly useful for a comprehensive perspective on disadvantages in education, namely the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw 1991; Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012; Gross, Gottburgsen, and Phoenix 2016). It is crucial to analyse inequalities at the intersection of social and migration origin, gender and physical or learning disability, and place of residence in order to take into account the diversity within these social groups and the interdependencies between certain axes of inequality. Some classical studies have already considered intersectionalities – such as Dahrendorf (1965), who revealed Catholic working-class girls originating from a rural area as being the most disadvantaged regarding educational attainment in Germany, or Willis (1977), who analysed working-class boys in Britain as a vulnerable group in the education system.

The intersectionality approach has a long tradition in qualitative studies on specific (additional) disadvantages that arise at certain intersections of axes of inequality (e.g. gender and ethnicity). One example is the discrimination of Black Caribbean women, as described in the seminal work by Crenshaw (1991). This has only recently received more attention by quantitative researchers (Gross et al. 2016), however, and such quantitative studies of intersectional inequalities remain scarce. In their comparative work involving eight European countries, Breen et al. (2010) found similar patterns of declining educational inequalities structured by social origin for both women and men during the educational expansion, but also some indications of intersectionalities. The disadvantage in educational attainment of the offspring of business and farm owners is less for daughters than for sons, appearing as relatively stable and even strengthening over time in some settings. They also pointed to between-country differences: in Poland and Italy, "… inequalities were much greater among women than men in the older cohorts and inequalities declined more rapidly among women" (ibid.). More recent results by Becker (2014) and Blossfeld et al. (2015) show that the educational participation of women of

working-class origins increased the most during the educational expansion. In sum, for the PI-ONEERED project the advantaged and disadvantaged groups are not homogeneous. There are specific (dis)advantages that relate to intersections (e.g. male working-class students) and deserve specific measures.

Comprehensive understanding of education

Education is analysed as both an outcome and a process that does not only relate to curricular settings in terms of formal educational organisations, such as schools and universities, but also to informal educational settings. The latter includes structured education processes in families, peer groups and informal (learning) groups outside school. Furthermore, the interplay between formal and informal education, for instance whether schools assign homework and how students differ in support resources for homework (family, peers, etc.), may be of interest as this is also a major mechanism behind inequalities that became more apparent during the Covid crisis starting in 2020 and home- or remote-schooling phases (e.g. Grewenig, Lergetporer, Werner, Woessmann, and Zierow 2021). Another issue of interest is shadow education in terms of private tutoring; particularly strong in Asia, this has become increasingly important in European countries (Smyth 2009; Tsiplakides 2018).

PIONEERED employs a broader view of skills and knowledge, not only looking at schooling and learning, but also beyond, that is to say at skills and knowledge needed for different life spheres (e.g. family life, health). While common approaches to assessing individual performance and education involve student grades, test results and diplomas, a wider definition of skills and educational outcomes is followed that includes generic skills in formal and informal settings at different education stages, well-being, health, and behavioural patterns of children and youth. This is meaningful, as it particularly makes sense to additionally consider these aspects with regard to [*or in terms of*] informal learning processes outside the classroom at school or university. In addition, social/soft skills (efficient communication, problem-solving, emotional skills, etc.) also appear to be of importance for learning processes and success in a wide range of life outcomes (Hyytinen, Toom, and Postareff 2018; Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez 2019; Tuononen 2019). All in all, skills and knowledge are viewed in terms of a comprehensive understanding of education. This includes the idea of education as a process of becoming: it refers to the ongoing "self-transformation", but also to the changing of society (Jobst 2014: 268).

Methodological approach and research design

Considering educational inequalities as a product of a combination of factors on different analysis levels (macro, meso, micro) and at specific historical time points, PIONEERED brings into focus issues of ecological embeddedness, interrelatedness, temporality and autonomy of practice regarding educational inequality. This implies a complex and holistic methodological approach, as depicted in Figure 1. Summarising the key ideas derived from the different concepts to tackle inequalities over the life course, the scientific approach to derive targeted actions of PIONEERED integrates:

- a multilevel perspective that considers mechanisms and innovations related to the macro level (policies on country or regional level), meso level (institutional settings such as schools) and micro level (teachers, students, parents);
- formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts (e.g. cultural activities, day care, shadow education) and the interplay of informal, non-formal and formal learning (e.g. how homework is given by the school vis-à-vis differential resources available in homes and day care institutions strengthens differences);
- a life-course perspective starting from the preschool age to the school-to-work transition and considering both uptake of education in the contexts in and outside educational organisations as mentioned above;
- not only intended but also unintended consequences of policies and practices, as these may also unintentionally contribute to the reproduction of such inequalities;
- and the consideration of specific (dis)advantages that relate to intersections (e.g. male working-class students), as advantaged and disadvantaged groups are not homogeneous and intersectional subgroups may deserve specific measures.

Figure 1. Scope of PIONEERED: Solutions to improve access to and uptake of education
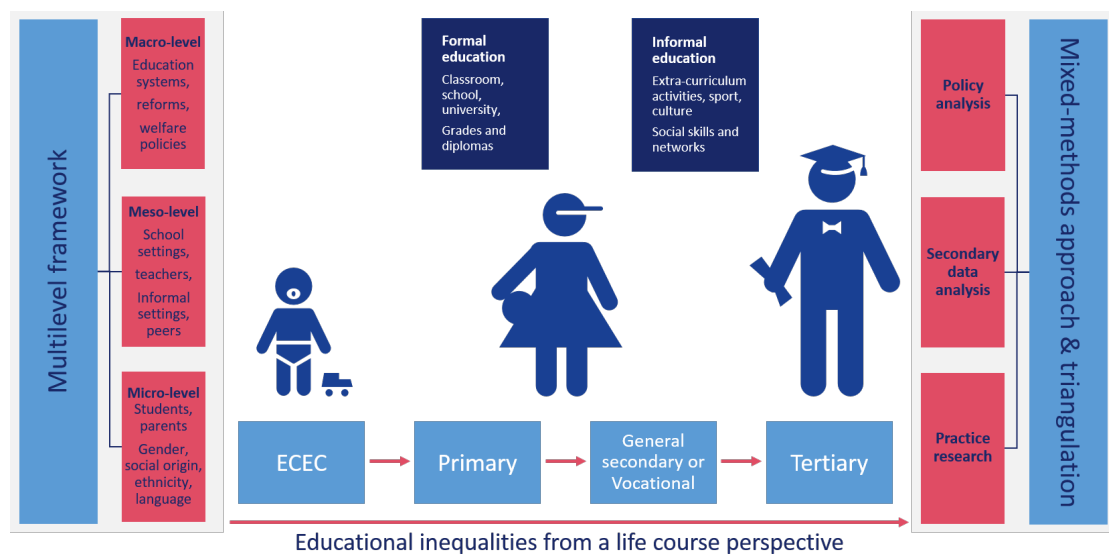
Source: PIONEERED project proposal.

Note: ECEC – Early childhood education and care.

Considering the different methodologies employed, the project triangulates different methodological approaches including desk research, and quantitative and qualitative methods being used in different work packages. Besides the usual project management, dissemination and ethics work packages, the project centres around five key work packages:

A desk research/literature review work package (publication databases, repositories such as Web of Science and Google Scholar) elaborates on the current state of research on groups who

are particularly disadvantaged regarding the uptake of education in the different countries, considering both the educational and the social sphere. Furthermore, in this work package the methodological approaches that will be applied in the empirical core work packages (policy analysis, secondary data analysis, and practice research) are developed. This centres on two different methodological tools: an analytical framework combining multilevel, intersectional, and life-course approaches (MILC); and a methodological approach for identifying/mapping innovative practices at the policy and school practice level.

The policy analysis work package aims at an in-depth analysis of educational and social policies and, thus, at the institutional analysis of the education system and related societal system characteristics (e.g. access to and quality of each stage of education, reforms in teacher education, changes in socio-economic and residential segregation, the role of welfare policies). This is based on policy document analysis and expert interviews. It involves an analysis of output of quantitative policy evaluation studies.

The secondary data analysis work package gains a systematic and comparative overview of educational inequalities and cumulative disadvantages structured by social origin, gender, ethnic origin and intersectionalities (e.g. male working-class students). This step is based on secondary data analyses of national panel studies (e.g. the German National Educational Panel Study/NEPS, the Luxembourgish Épreuves standardisées school monitoring from Luxembourg, the Transitions from Education to Employment/TREE study from Switzerland, Growing up in Ireland), international large-scale assessment studies such as PISA, TIMSS or PIAAC, and administrative data in order to identify factors that seem to protect vulnerable children and young people from academic failure.

The practice research work package follows a participatory, practice-oriented (e.g. Tillmann and Hollenbach 2011) and comparative research methodology with the main objective to produce relevant insights into educational processes that aim to tackle educational inequality in the different countries. While aiming at a deeper understanding of different types of pioneering practice for tackling educational inequalities in specific contexts, researchers will also compare practices across different contexts to finally provide evidence-based knowledge and recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. Major steps towards the identification and sampling of cases for the fieldwork include: workshops and interviews with stakeholders/end users and qualitative case studies. The latter involve multifaceted ethnographies (fieldnotes, conversations, observations, experiences) in education institutions (pre-schooling and schooling).

These empirical work packages are followed by a synthesis work package that aims at triangulating the different outcomes of policy analysis, secondary data analysis and practice research based on a specific methodology of how to select most promising policies and practices.

Conclusion: What PIONEERED can contribute to social policies

Seeking to provide evidence-based policy tools in the reduction of educational inequalities, and particularly in overcoming barriers to accessing education among certain disadvantaged groups in society, the PIONEERED project is highly relevant for educational and social policies, both in a national and an international context. Through scientific assessments of policy options,

institutional structures and pioneering practices, PIONEERED focuses on outcomes such as the formulation of evidence-based policy measures and solutions, applicable at multiple levels. A social policy relevance of the project is also predefined as the respective Horizon call related to the programme *Horizon 2020 Societal Challenge of Europe in a Changing World – Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies* and thus links to societal and social problems that are key targets of social policy. The project contributes to the need for supranational policies in addition to national, regional and local measures.

The project goals include contributing to the reduction of social inequalities and exclusion in education, and increasing the opportunities for vulnerable groups in the education system (such as the working class, male students, certain immigrant groups, and groups at the intersection of these axes of inequality). Improving access to and the uptake of education from the youngest age for these groups reduces their risk of marginalisation, long-term poverty and social exclusion in Europe. This can be achieved not only by empowering learners in their performance, but also by providing measures of support to instructors and schools in different educational contexts. Policies and practices on the level of the education system, in schools and other educational organisations, and beyond in informal settings, such as the family, peer groups and day care, are at the core of the PIONEERED project.

PIONEERED takes up the societal challenges associated with inequalities, including existing inequalities related to social background and gender, and emerging inequalities related to household and income composition (e.g. single parent or working poor families) and ethnicity/migration background. By focusing on migration background, the project also responds to growing migration flows within Europe. Another important aspect deals with gender segregation (vertical and horizontal) in education systems. The project furthermore captures key competencies and skills that are of crucial importance beyond the core education phase and throughout the life course. In addition, considering digital skills relates to the societal challenge of the fourth industrial revolution, namely the digitalisation of the production processes, and related changing lifestyles becoming more digital.

As policy analysis, and the way that policies at the societal (national or regional) level (macro level) impact institutions, such as schools (meso level), and individuals (micro level), are core features of the proposed project, it explicitly links to the challenges of governance. The latter implies achieving a strong correspondence between equality goals and the reality of schooling and learning, or how to implement policies in educational institutions, which are also a key issue of studies in social policies.

As outlined, even if educational policies and social policies are seen as separate spheres – although we prefer to see educational policies as an integral part of social policies – the outlined PIONEERED project is strongly linked to social policies. Reducing skill and competency gaps in childhood and youth during the core education phase and abolishing related disadvantages and *educational poverty* across Europe will help to equalise the life chances of formerly disadvantaged groups and even improve society, making it a more liveable, democratic and economically prosperous place. As outlined above, educational policies can be a prevention measure against limited chances on the labour market and unemployment, lower income and poverty, low political participation, poor health, and shorter lifetime expectancy. The more that is invested in education at the earlier life stages to prevent educational failure, the less social policies

will need to cover later regarding compensatory and support measures. Furthermore, education in terms of a lifelong process can also be a tool of social policy measures (even in a narrow definition of what social policies are) – for example, qualification of unemployed adults at older ages. Thus, educational policies and PIONEERED, as a research project attempt to identify pioneering policies and practices to tackle educational inequalities, are highly relevant for the field of social policy.

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