

## INTERSECTIONALITY IN EDUCATION POLICY DOCUMENTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NINE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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### Abstract

With educational inequalities intensively studied through empirical and academic research over the last few decades, there is now a growing recognition that an intersectionality perspective is necessary for a better understanding of vulnerabilities. This paper underlines the importance of intersectionality for policy analysis and policy making by using findings from PIONEERED, a project funded by the Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. The paper demonstrates that intersectionality is increasingly recognized in scholarship regarding educational inequalities of the nine<sup>3</sup> PIONEERED countries, and slowly taking root among stakeholders in these countries. A review of education policies highlighted that while in all analysed countries the policy perceptions of educational vulnerability have become increasingly complex over time, acknowledging the multitude of disadvantages and vulnerabilities that contribute to education inequalities, nevertheless in most cases, policies do not explicitly incorporate the intersectional framework. Considering the limited inquiry into the topic, this study uniquely addresses the extent to which education policy documents are cognizant of different axes of inequalities and intersectionality in defining vulnerable groups.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, vulnerability, educational inequality, education policy

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## Introduction

In 2016, during fieldwork in a Hungarian institution that provides conductive education<sup>4</sup> – a comprehensive method of learning for students with neurological and mobility impairment – teachers and parents reflected on their experiences regarding vulnerable children (Dunajeva 2016). While conducting interviews, the complexities of inequalities and the lived experiences of children have powerfully emerged, illuminating layers of vulnerabilities and interlinkages between those who shape their lives. One parent in particular described the case of her 12-year-old daughter in the following way:

In the country we came from, my daughter was first denied a gynaecological treatment suggesting she “won’t need it.” I was appalled at the doctor who denied reproductive rights to my girl because she was in a wheelchair. It did occur to me whether we would have experienced the same denial had she been a boy... We also experienced multiple problems with education – inaccessible infrastructure, non-equipped classrooms, no mental and pedagogical assistance, and quite frankly, no desire to even have children “with problems” in the classroom. I think the education of girls is seen as unnecessary sometimes, let alone girls in a wheelchair... We are also visibly different from others; sometimes I hear verbal abuse on the street when we used to go out for a walk, as everyone can see we are [a minority]. (Interview with a parent 2016)

This interview illustrates the multiplicity of identities that in combination resulted in negative treatment of a young minority woman with limited abilities, as expressed by her mother.

This interview also demonstrates the complex nature of inequalities, stemming from intersecting identities and different sets of experiences. Focusing on educational inequalities in particular, the ultimate question is how the situation of this 12-year-old girl can be best captured and addressed to mitigate disadvantages. While educational inequalities and their impact have long been at the centre of attention for both academics and policy makers, yet the way educational inequalities are discussed in policy still tends to follow a myopic logic of single-axis inequalities. It is all too common to hear about unequal access to education for women, minority groups, low-income students and other marginalised communities. Habitually, such discourse entirely misses the way intersecting identities influence educational experiences (Bhopal 2020). Only sporadically are there comprehensive discussions of inequalities that consider the intersection of multiple identities and vulnerabilities—a disabled woman who belongs to a discriminated minority group will most definitely have more obstacles to education than women in general in a given society.

The following questions may resonate in particular with researchers of educational inequality who engage in fieldwork: How can evidence of complexities of lived experience better translate to policies and contribute to a more efficient way of addressing inequalities? Are policies sufficiently accounting for the circumstances of

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<sup>4</sup> “Conductive Education is a comprehensive method of learning by which individuals with neurological and mobility impairment learn to specifically and consciously perform actions that children without such impairment learn through normal life experiences” (Simmelweis University, n.d.).

this 12-year-old girl, by providing her with opportunities to mitigate her vulnerabilities? How can we better capture the intricacies of overlapping forms of inequalities, especially in the field of education research and education policy? More importantly, there is a growing consensus regarding the significance of incorporating inequality and diversity into pragmatic and modern policy frameworks, as intersectionality-informed policy making promotes equity and social justice, explicitly recognising the voices of multiply marginalised groups and individuals. To achieve that, some researchers advocate for developing ways to honour the complexities of lived experiences, in order to promote equity in education, where personal experiences are framed by an intersectionality approach (Allweiss 2014, p. 288).

Based on the examples of those selected countries in Europe, this paper sets the goal of evaluating the extent to which intersectional approaches are currently incorporated in scholarship and policy. The paper starts with delineating the theoretical foundations of intersectionality, and moves on to the findings generated from a series of inquiries within the PIONEERED international project regarding policy perspectives on education. More specifically, we synthesize the results of stakeholder consultations and policy reviews, which were conducted by teams of researchers, and conclude that the importance of intersectionality is demonstrable, but not yet explicit in all cases.

## **Methodology**

This paper relies on the national reports (included in the bibliography) produced by research teams 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 arising from the access to, and the uptake and completion of, education – both in formal and informal educational settings. To this end, researchers from nine participating countries (Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Switzerland) have conducted an analysis of those concepts in policy discourse and policy documents relevant for educational inequalities.

This paper also makes use of several deliverables from the PIONEERED project in an effort to synthesize relevant project findings about intersectionality in research and policy documents, related to educational inequalities. In particular, the “State of Research” report (Benz et al 2021), the “Report on Stakeholders’ Knowledge” (Bollig-Jobst 2022) and the “Comparative Analysis Report” (Dunajeva 2022) were particularly instructive for this paper. For each of these reports, teams of researchers from the nine countries generated country-level analyses that served as the foundation of the comparative assessments. The “State of Research” report was aimed at mapping the state of research in all PIONEERED countries regarding educational inequalities (Benz et al 2021). For the report, project partners generated literature reviews for scholarly publications from the last decade.

The “Comparative Analysis Report” contained comparative analysis of the definition of unequal education used over time, the description of vulnerable groups that were targeted by policy interventions, and an examination of inequalities prioritized in policy strategies and interventions (Dunajeva 2022). It was based on the country-level analysis of policy documents identified by research teams. The resulting country reports traced the evolution of educational inequality, in part

evaluating whether intersectional inequalities are recognized in education policies and legislation. Finally, the “Report on Stakeholders’ Knowledge” presented stakeholders’ knowledge about current practices tackling educational inequalities in nine countries (Bollig–Jobst 2022). This report was based on interviews, focus groups and workshops conducted in each country with stakeholders. Stakeholders were defined as “national, regional and local government officers responsible for educational equality and inclusion, policy makers, teacher union experts, educational practitioners, teacher educators, representatives of community-led neighbourhood groups, representatives of parental organisations and representatives of transnational networks tackling educational inequalities” (ibid., 1). These stakeholders should then be viewed as actors who have power to influence policy and directly participate in shaping policy discourse.

Building on these findings, the goal of the paper is to advance our understanding of whether and how an intersectionality approach is applied in the realm of policy, and promote cross-fertilization between academia and policy making. Such knowledge transfers are conducive to better uptake of evidence and introducing needed complexities in policy making (Smith–Joyce 2012).

## **Theory and Concepts: Intersectionality and Educational Inequality**

### *Definition and Origin of Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is defined as a framework that posits the following: individual experience is shaped by interwoven memberships in social categories, and this experience is also reflective of power dynamics in the given society (Crenshaw 1991; Keller et al 2023). In policy research, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) has first introduced this concept, which was further popularized by the widely read article of Tiffany Manuel (2006). After that, only the initial meaning of intersectionality was abundantly discussed, while the actual application was undertheorized at best, but often missing entirely in policy studies (Garcia 2022). While many scholars encourage the application of an intersectional lens in public policy, yet intersectional approaches to public policy analysis remain scarce.

Some scholars argue that intersectional approaches are especially apt to explain educational inequalities because they are attentive to “simultaneous membership in multiple social categories that are associated with interconnected systems of power, privilege, and oppression” (Keller et al 2023). An intersectional lens therefore suggests that educational inequality is structured along different axes of belonging, such as gender, race or social origin, and specific disadvantages arise where axes of inequality intersect. With that, “an intersectionality approach challenges the separateness of different axes of inequality and emphasizes interrelated disadvantages that arise at the intersections of different forms of educational inequality” (Benz et al 2021, p. 16). This means that there are multiple characteristics, traits, circumstances and conditions that may be linked to educational disadvantage; a combination and interaction between these should be taken into consideration when analysing and mitigating inequalities.

Most importantly, “an intersectional approach challenges the notion of the separateness of social categories by stating that inequalities often result from a (non-linear and non-constant) combination of the disadvantages along multiple axes” (Benz et al 2021, p. 16) – particularly relevant for the earlier introduced example of a girl with limited physical abilities with a minority background. In addition,

intersectionality also refutes essentialist views of identities and suggests that identities are culturally constructed and embedded in relations of power, oppression and privilege (Liasidou 2013).

The intersectionality approach has been slowly taking root in social sciences, and more recently emerged as an “internationally recognized approach to conducting research that takes seriously interlocking issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Hankivsky–Jordan-Zachery 2019, p. 1). Arguably, the pandemic served as a push towards recognising that different forms of inequalities affect groups with a variety of backgrounds, “igniting an intersectional shift in public policy research” (Tedds 2022). To test this assertion, a quick search was performed on the Web of Science database for a combination of “intersectionality” and “public policy” keywords, indeed showing a growing interest towards an intersectional analysis of public policy issues, yet the relevance of intersectionality for public policy remains relatively unexplored, especially in some regions. Our search revealed that the number of studies remains relatively low, and most studies addressed the context of the United States as the region most analysed, followed by Canada. A systematic literature review (covering the period between 2010 and 2017) reached a similar conclusion: there are significant gaps in research coverage, with regions such as Eastern Europe entirely underrepresented and North America significantly overrepresented (Garcia 2022).

The geographical focus on the United States is logical, considering that intersectionality research began with the American Black feminist scholarship: intersectionality was advanced by African American critical race and feminist scholars in their attempt to conceptualize, analyse and overcome various forms of exclusion (Rice et al 2019). Black female scholars wrote that the experience of their community must be understood at the intersection of race, gender and class (Schiller 2000). Scholars have also stressed that intersectionality is a historically contingent concept, and although it is a product of Black feminism, the meaning and application of intersectional framework has indeed changed throughout history (Nash 2011). What this paper points out is that intersectionality travels not only through time, but also through geographies: intersectionality as a framework has been adopted in various regions and contexts from its inception in the United States, informing questions and topics related to inequalities and oppressions in other regions (Robert–Yu 2018).

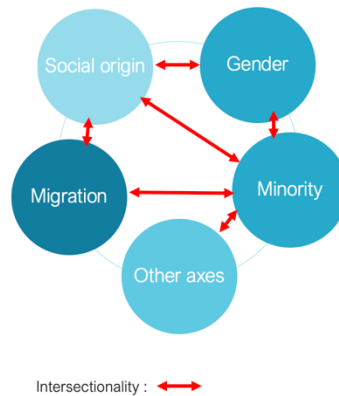
### *Intersectionality in Understanding Educational Inequalities in Nine Countries*

A review of literature – conducted within the framework of the PIONEERED project – with a focus on participating countries identified several important intersections associated with educational inequality (Benz et al 2021). Social origin, gender and migration background have emerged as the most discussed axes of inequality in academic literature across the nine countries, followed by axes related to minority status (cultural and ethnic minorities), health (in particular limited abilities) and geography (especially underserved and underfunded regional differences in countries). These findings match the axes of inequalities raised by other studies examining educational inequalities within an intersectional framework (Keller et al 2023). Collectively, the analysed trends in research among these nine countries indicate that there is a growing appreciation of these complexities, especially regarding multiple identities and the intersections of those experiences. Intersections

associated with educational inequalities within the PIONEERED countries were most commonly discussed among the following axes (visually illustrated in Figure 1 below): social origin and gender; social origin and migration background; gender and migration background; minority status and other axes of inequality (Benz et al 2021, p. 27).

Figure 1. Intersectional lens used in research on educational inequalities

### Axes of inequalities and intersectionality



Source: based on (Benz et al 2021)

We illustrate this point with two examples, first through research on the migration background, which was particularly relevant for those PIONEERED countries where the immigrant population is sizable. For example, in Germany research documents differ in the experience of “classic labor migrants” (i.e. Turkish or Italian) and other migrants (i.e., from Eastern Europe or former Soviet countries), where the former group performs worse (Dollmann 2017; Miyamoto et al 2020). In Spain (Álvarez de Sotomayor–Martínez-Cousinou 2016), Luxembourg (Backes–Hadjar 2017; Tavares 2020) and Switzerland (Laganà et al 2014; Schnell–Fibbi 2016) findings similarly suggest that certain migrant groups perform worse in education than others, due to intersecting experiences stemming from their ethnic background, social status in society and other reasons (Benz et al 2021, p. 22). Some research considered the particular experience of returning migrants, which was relevant in the case of Lithuania (Budginaitė–Mašidlauskaitė 2015) and Germany (Kogan, 2011). In many cases the migration background overlapped with lower socio-economic status, generating inequalities that must be seen through an intersectional lens (Glaser 2018, Pit-Ten Cate–Krischler 2018).

Another example where intersectionality was particularly prevalent is research on minority groups, particularly Roma. Academic inquiry from those PIONEERED countries, especially from Hungary, Lithuania and Spain demonstrate the critical importance of intersectionality for understanding the disadvantages Roma face in the education system: their experience is defined by their low socio-economic status, racial discrimination, spatial segregation and gender stereotypes (Kertesi–Kézdi 2012; Csüllög et al 2015; Alfageme-Chao–García-Pastor 2015; Cárdenas-Rodríguez et al 2019; Petrušauskaitė 2014). As a result, Roma lack access

to equal education across all national contexts. In general, there is a growing application of intersectional theory to the oppression and discrimination of Roma across many disciplines and policy areas, calling for intersectional justice (Vincze 2013; D'Agostino 2015).

Intersectional analysis has enjoyed a growing recognition among researchers of gender studies with a focus on Roma women beyond those PIONEERED countries as well, suggesting that the intersectional analysis is an especially appropriate framework to reveal the complex forms of disadvantage that Roma women face in fields such as the education and labour market (Cukrowska-Torzewska 2014; Uzunöz-Yurdakul 2021). Intersectional analysis was likewise commonly used to understand inequalities faced by other minority groups in PIONEERED countries. Groups such as Russian-speakers in Lithuania (Dambrauskas 2020), or the Sami people in Finland and Norway (Andersen-Olsen 2018) were discussed given their multiple forms of marginalisation in society along their cultural, linguistic or other identities.

Overall, the literature review pointed out that intersectionality is not only key for understanding inequalities in the education system, but there is a growing recognition of intersecting inequalities and their effect on educational performance in scholarship. Comparative analysis also highlighted that while academic literature from the analysed countries had begun exploring intersectionality in education research, there were still under-studied areas concerning an intersectional approach in educational inequalities. Given the established importance of intersectionality for understanding inequalities, it is now worth inquiring whether there is a cross-fertilization between the realms of academia and policy, and if policy documents have adopted the concept of intersectionality in their efforts to mitigate educational inequalities. To unpack this puzzle, we provide examples from various countries' policy discourse and documents regarding the relevance of intersectionality in defining vulnerabilities in education.

## **Discussion: Application of Intersectionality in Policy**

### *Importance of intersectionality in education policy*

A recent study conducted by the OECD has uniquely inquired about intersectionality in education, more specifically education policy. The study concluded that while explicit consideration of intersectionality in policy development remains rare, the concept is recognised in some countries, being defined or referred to in official government publications (Varsik-Gorochovskij 2023, p. 69). The study also argues that given the conducted academic research in the area of intersectionality and education, the attentiveness of policy makers to intersectional experiences of a diverse student body can greatly benefit policies and lead to better outcomes. In particular, evidence suggests that by adopting an intersectional lens, interventions become better tailored and more effective in improving educational outcomes and equality.

In academic research, there is sporadic data regarding whether and how countries may be adjusting their education policies to account for intersectionality. Rather, many studies advocate for changes in policy making and practices in education, arguing that incorporating intersectionality (or intersectional thinking), would help policies shed single identity markers and instead promote a view of individual experience as complex and intersectional (Bešić 2020). Evidence indicates

that without an intersectional framework, policies mitigating inequalities are not able to capture the true extent of vulnerabilities. For example, one study argues that an intersectional approach helps reveal inequality that remains invisible if categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity) are considered in isolation (Meili et al 2022). Given the insufficient understanding of the intersectional approach relevant for policies, in this section we rely on two reports from the PIONEERED project (Dunajeva 2022; Bollig-Jobst 2022).

### *Towards a complex view of the vulnerable groups in education*

A review of the most important education policies in the nine PIONEERED countries revealed that educational inequality and vulnerable groups are increasingly seen in a complex way. For example, in Spain, the question of educational inequalities first appeared in educational policy in the early 1970s, initially emphasizing individual learning deficits (Vázquez-Cupeiro et al 2022). In the later decades, “vulnerable” and “socially excluded” groups began to appear in the policy discourse, recognizing the multitude of structural and contextual factors – and their interactions – that contribute to inequalities in educational settings (Vázquez-Cupeiro et al 2022). In Lithuania the evolution of “special needs students” moved from a disability-focused model (the dominant view in all of Eastern Europe at the time) to a broader understanding of special needs that can arise from a variety of factors (Bankauskaite-Dunajeva 2022). In Germany, the numerous economic, social, political and cultural changes that have taken place in the country over the last 50 years have unmistakably contributed to the redefinition of vulnerability as well, with more attentiveness to multiple forms of disadvantage (Kuger-Prein 2021).

An analysis of stakeholder perspectives also indicated that actors who influence education policy are often aware that educational inequalities arise as a consequence of various social, cultural, economic, political factors and other reasons. Their views of vulnerability often assumed an inherent complexity and interplay between axes of inequality. Intersectionality was particularly relevant in the case of Switzerland and Norway. In the former case, intersectionality was widely taken into consideration by stakeholders, especially in the case of the interplay between migrant origin and low socioeconomic status, but also migrant origin, gender, and disability. In the latter country, stakeholders found intersectionality pertinent to explaining the interconnected axes of educational inequality: the combination of the socioeconomic background, country of origin, language, culture, and ethnicity (Bollig-Jobst 2022, pp. 17, 21).

In other cases, intersectionality was a useful lens for discussing the experience of particular groups, and the intersecting forms of vulnerabilities they face when accessing education. Unsurprisingly, in Hungary and to a limited extent in Lithuania, the discussion of Roma students invoked intersectionality among stakeholders. In Luxembourg, the situation of male students from Portugal was seen through an intersectional framework, considering a combination of socio-economic, socio-cultural and linguistic factors leading to educational inequality (Bollig-Jobst 2022). In these cases, intersectional thinking was limited to appreciating the situation of particular groups, most often at the centre of attention for policy makers and whose experience was widely analysed in reports and scholarship (i.e., Roma).

Germany is an indicative case where the understanding of educational inequality among stakeholders has been permeated by intersectional thinking, while policy has not: intersectionality was often used to elucidate the disadvantages faced



by migrants of low socio-economic status, while many stakeholders also acknowledged the interplay between other axes of inequality, such as disabilities, poverty, migration status or ethnic background (Bollig-Jobst 2022, p. 6). Yet, intersectionality was seen as less relevant when discussing practices related to mitigating educational inequalities, indicating the scarce application of this framework in the realm of policy.

In other PIONEERED countries, intersectionality was less relevant for stakeholders. In Finland, while some stakeholders mentioned examples such as the intersecting vulnerabilities due to multicultural background combined with economic disadvantages, more often the discussion of disadvantages revolved around single categorizations (e.g., boys, Sami children) with no explicit recognition of an intersectional perspective (Bollig-Jobst 2022, p. 4). Similarly in Ireland, Spain and Lithuania, where few, if any, stakeholders discussed educational inequalities using the framework of intersectionality, and rather identified individual factors, detached from one another, that contribute to disadvantage and inequality in education (most commonly socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnicity).

It is then clear that based on the stakeholders' perspective, which we earlier framed as indicative of policy discourse, intersectionality is explicitly present only in the case of Switzerland. In other countries, the complex nature of inequalities was acknowledged, but not the intersectional interplay between axes of inequalities. Understanding the relevance of intersectionality in policy discourse is imperative as it shows how policy actors interact with information regarding intersectionality, and may give us a better understanding of what values, principles and objectives will likely become codified into policies (Dayton 2000). Based on this view, we expect relatively limited resonance of intersectionality in policy documents, with the exception of Switzerland.

### *Intersectionality in policy documents*

Earlier sections in this paper have established the relevance of intersectionality for understanding educational inequalities, in part based on literature reviewed from nine PIONEERED countries and beyond. The stakeholders' perspective revealed some permeation of intersectional thinking, while in many countries the intersectional approach has not taken root in policy discourse. In this section, we turn to policy documents to unpack whether and to what extent intersectionality is featured in policy texts of the PIONEERED countries. Below are some examples from countries, suggesting that an intersectional approach is in the incipient stages of being incorporated into policy documents.

During the analysis of policy documents, Switzerland once again emerged as the country where intersectionality carried the most weight. In particular, the 2030 Sustainable Strategy of Switzerland identifies a number of intersectional inequalities relevant for the education system in particular: for instance, youth with a migration background with low socio-economic status is more likely to underperform in school (Erzinger et al 2022). Other policy documents highlighted numerous axes of inequalities and their interplay, such as disabilities, gender, poverty, social disadvantages as well as of migration background (Swiss Federal Council 2021; EDK 2016; Erzinger et al 2022).

Besides Switzerland, intersectionality as such was not mentioned in policy documents of other countries, although the concept was implicitly employed in various formulations of vulnerable groups. This is a clear indication that in the realm

of policies, intersectionality has not yet taken root, based on the analysis of nine PIONEERED countries. This is also supported by other scholars, such as by the collective of authors of the *Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy* (Hankivsky–Jordan-Zachery 2019) who suggest, in line with our analysis, that

Intersectionality has garnered significant attention in the field of public policy and other disciplines/fields of study. The potential of intersectionality, however, has not been fully realized in policy, largely due to the challenges of operationalization...

Nevertheless, some examples of how intersectionality implicitly informs policy documents merits some attention as well. 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 (Bankauskaite–Dunajeva 2022). There is an indication of intersectionality in the case of Ireland, where educational disadvantages are conceptualized by taking into account the “multiplier effect,” which indicates the proportion of students in a school who face disadvantages, highlighting a compounding nature of disadvantages (Darmody–Smyth 2022). In the contexts of Hungary, Spain, Ireland and Lithuania, the Roma minority (and Travellers) are targeted by multiple policies as vulnerable groups facing intersecting forms of discrimination that puts them at a disadvantage (Bankauskaite–Dunajeva 2022; Vázquez-Cupeiro et al 2022; Darmody–Smyth 2022; Lórinč 2022).

Furthermore, in the cases of Hungary, Lithuania and Germany, it is primarily within the realm of integration or inclusion policy that the role of education is discussed while recognizing some forms of intersectional vulnerabilities. In Lithuania, the Action Plan for Roma Integration into Lithuanian Society for 2015–2020 highlights intersectional discrimination faced by young Roma women and girls (Bankauskaite–Dunajeva 2022). In Germany, the National Action Plan on Integration (NAP Integ) discusses the experience of migrants in a nuanced, complex way, paying attention to first- and second-generation migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, while also reflecting on social changes that affect their experiences in the education system and beyond (Bollig et al. 2022). The Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy highlights intersectional viewpoints and in particular the vulnerability of Roma women (Lórinč 2022).

In summary, besides Switzerland, other analysed PIONEERED countries fell short of explicitly incorporating the concept of intersectionality and deliberately ascertaining the axes of inequalities in policy documents. Nevertheless, the analysis highlighted that intersectionality is not an irrelevant concept for policies and policy making, and intersectional framing of vulnerabilities, inequalities and disadvantages is implicit in numerous countries. It is also worth mentioning that intersectionality is gaining momentum in policy making at the level of the European Union. Some scholars argue that intersectionality in EU policies is still in its “embryonic stage” (D’Agostino 2015, p. 95). Yet recent developments indicate a stronger emphasis on intersectionality in EU-level policies. For example, the European Parliament resolution of 4 October, 2023 on the segregation and discrimination of Roma children in education states that “Roma children face intersectional discrimination and obstacles to equal participation in education” (European Parliament 2023).

## Conclusions and Implications

Educational inequalities are one of the most persistent challenges, both globally and across Europe. Inequalities remain high, both between social categories and among EU Member States, generating an ever-growing interest in understanding and mitigating those (Blaskó et al 2021). Achieving equitable education is generally the responsibility of educational authorities in EU Member States, and nearly all EU countries have major policy initiatives to endorse equity in education; equity in education is often described using concepts such as “fairness, equal opportunities, equality/inequality, disadvantage, non-discrimination, vulnerable groups, at risk groups and early school leaving” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2020). Interestingly, findings demonstrate that the education system may reproduce existing social inequalities, rather than mitigating these (Hadjar et al 2018), making a better understanding of education policy particularly critical.

Intersectionality emerged as a framework for understanding the forms of inequalities and discrimination relevant for education and more specifically, education policy. The review of academic literature regarding the nine PIONEERED countries revealed that educational inequalities are unequivocally seen as a complex issue, resulting from multiple forms of deprivation, different needs and conditions of students that affect their ability to perform within the education system, as well as the unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities. Intersectionality was a relevant and used concept in some of the reviewed studies. Some scholars convincingly argue that scholarship on intersectionality has galvanized a “conceptual shift” in how policy actors understand social categories, including those of vulnerable groups (D’Agostino 2015, p. 95). Hence, we can assume some cross-fertilization between academia and policy, which our paper has also indicated.

In this paper we have also acknowledged intersectionality’s origins in the American Black feminist scholarship, and joined scholars who wish to understand how the concept travels and transforms in the process “transnational knowledge production,” adapted in national policy documents (Robert–Yu 2018; Choo 2012). To that end, we reviewed the stakeholders’ perspective and relevant policy documents. The former analysis showed that in many analysed countries, stakeholders were aware of the intersectional nature of lived experiences, especially in the case of vulnerable groups. Often, however, intersectional thinking did not extend to policy making. That was further supported with the review of policy documents that did not explicitly incorporate intersectionality, with the exception of Switzerland. In other countries we suggested that intersectional experiences were considered implicitly, especially in relation to particular marginalized groups. With that, we concluded that most countries fall short of explicitly incorporating the concept of intersectionality and deliberately ascertaining the axes of inequalities in policy documents. Overall, we consider the role of intersectionality relevant and growing for both, education research and policy discourse.

Our findings imply that policies are indeed changing, as a result of shifting modes of thinking, values and concepts that travel from academic discourse and the field of international policy making. There is a commonly embraced perspective that policy change is a slow and cumbersome process due to path dependence, as formal institutions tend to prioritize durability and stability, with policy makers defending existing structures 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 (Sabatier 1988; Cerna 2013). We also problematize the path dependence approach and suggest that intersectionality, as a relatively novel idea for policy making, is seeping into the policy discourse as demonstrated by such aspects as the definition of educational vulnerabilities or educational inequalities.

In particular, we suggest that policies are changing in part as a result of cross-fertilization between scholarship on intersectionality and policy practice. Accordingly, there is a growing understanding of diversity within the student body and of students' needs, together with a (slowly) emerging awareness of intersectionality among policy actors and policy documents, manifested in the transformation of the meanings of vulnerability and educational inequality in all countries under investigation (Dunajeva 2022). We also recognize that challenges remain to the application of intersectionality-informed policy making (La Barbera et al 2023). Hence, some recent scholarly work has set the goal of facilitating the adaptation of intersectionality in policy making. For example, one study provides analytical and empirical input for "detecting intersecting group-based inequalities to inform policy-making" (Meili et al 2022), and another study strives to demonstrate "the value and 'how-to' of intersectionality-informed policy approaches that aim to advance equity and social justice" (Hankivsky-Jordan-Zachery 2019, p. 1). This paper aimed at providing a modest contribution to this debate by considering the relevance of intersectionality in scholarship, policy discourse and policy documents based on the findings of PIONEERED that involved nine countries.

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## **INTERSZEKCIONALITÁS FOGALMA AZ OKTATÁSPOLITIKAI DOKUMENTUMOKBAN: KILENC EURÓPAI ORSZÁG ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÓ ELEMZÉSE**

JEKATYERINA DUNAJEVA, HANNA SIAROVA

Az oktatási egyenlőtlenségek az elmúlt évtizedekben jelentős figyelmet kaptak empirikus és tudományos kutatásokban egyaránt, amelyekben rámutattak arra, hogy az interszekcionalitás fogalma nélkülözhetetlen a társadalmi kiszolgáltatottság és hátrányok megértéséhez. Mindezekhez kapcsolódóan ez a tanulmány bemutatja a Horizon 2020 kutatási és innovációs program által finanszírozott PIONEERED projekt eredményeit, melyek hangsúlyozzák az interszekcionalitás fontosságát az oktatáspolitikai elemzésekben, illetve a szakpolitikai döntéshozatalban. Továbbá a tanulmány kiemeli azt is, hogy az interszekcionalitás egyre szélesebb körben ismert fogalommá válik az oktatási egyenlőtlenségek terén végzett tudományos kutatásokban a kilenc PIONEERED projektben résztvevő országban, valamint elkezdett elterjedni az oktatásban érdekelt szereplők körében is. A kutatás során végzett elemzés rámutatott arra is, hogy bár a vizsgált országok mindegyikében az oktatási hátrányokra és egyenlőtlenségekre vonatkozó politikai felfogások idővel egyre összetettebbé váltak, ugyanakkor az interszekcionalitás fogalma az oktatáspolitikai dokumentumokban nem, vagy csak ritkán jelenik meg. Tekintettel a csekély tudásanyagra ebben a témában, ez a tanulmány egyedülálló módon vizsgálja, hogy az oktatáspolitikai dokumentumok milyen mértékben ismerik fel az interszekcionalitás fontosságát a kiszolgáltatott csoportok meghatározása során.

**Kulcsszavak:** interszekcionalitás, kiszolgáltatottság, oktatási egyenlőtlenség, oktatáspolitikai