

PISA, Socioeconomic Achievement Gaps, and Education Policies

Louis Volante, Sylke V. Schnepf, John Jerrim & Don A. Klinger

The OECD has traditionally conceptualized excellence in education by highlighting education systems that have high achievement and negligible gaps in PISA performance between boys and girls, immigrants and non-immigrants, and students from high versus low socioeconomic status (SES) groups.

Our recent [Springer \(2019\) book¹](#) features leading academics' research on socioeconomic inequality and educational outcomes in Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. Each national profile provides an overview of trajectories of pupils' achievement results – in relation to PISA and if available also to national administrative data; and discusses the effectiveness of policy responses that have been adopted to reduce socioeconomic achievement gaps between high and low SES students.

Why is socioeconomic status and student achievement an important topic?

There are at least three reasons why the relationship between SES and student outcomes is a timely issue. The first is social justice. Children do not choose their

Louis Volante
Brock University, UNU-MERIT, and Visiting Professor at UCL/IOE, e-mail: lvolante@brocku.ca

Sylke V. Schnepf
European Commission's Joint Research Centre (Ispra, Italy), e-mail: Sylke.SCHNEPF@ec.europa.eu

John Jerrim
UCL Institute of Education, e-mail: j.jerrim@ucl.ac.uk

Don A. Klinger
University of Waikato, e-mail: dklinger@waikato.ac.nz

¹ <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9789811398629>

family and/or SES position. Thus, it is “unfair” if subsequent life opportunities are to a large extent determined by a factor that resides outside of one’s control. Second, there is an unfortunate persistence of inequality. Education can serve as a driver to create intergenerational mobility to redress the issues of persistence (Goldthorpe, 2014)²; however, lack of quality access may serve to maintain or even increase these inequalities. Third, in a competitive world, it is critically important that nation states maximize their human resources. If students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds are failing to reach their full academic potential, then this is unlikely to be the case.

What are the trajectories of socioeconomic inequalities?

As the chapter authors have illustrated, in most countries, socioeconomic inequalities stayed similar or even increased with the exception of Germany. Using the most recent PISA 2015 data, those with lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds reflect gaps in achievement as much as one to two years of schooling. This suggests the clear cross-national need for further policy implementation to combat educational inequalities.

What policy interventions are associated with socioeconomic inequality?

Summarizing from national profiles, education policies influencing the socioeconomic achievement gaps can be categorized along three dimensions: tracking versus comprehensive schooling, school autonomy versus centralization, and curriculum and instruction.

The most compelling evidence for a policy that increases socioeconomic achievement inequality was found with school tracking. Tracking refers to channeling students into different school programs with different curriculum, learning targets, and post-secondary career pathways. Tracking is generally associated with lower national average performance as well as greater social segregation of schools. Policies related to the use of school tracking are more likely to increase achievement gaps. Nevertheless, it is also apparent from the findings in the book that the relationship between tracking, socioeconomic inequality, and student achievement is not universal. As highlighted by several of the chapter authors, policies explored in isolation of specific national contexts or in combination with other policies will likely lead to oversimplified or inaccurate conclusions.

² <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463113519068>

Our work, which is also summarized in a [European Commission policy brief](#)³, suggests the complexity of national contexts makes it difficult to evaluate education policies cross-nationally. As a result, caution should therefore be exercised when using PISA results to promote specific educational policy interventions globally.

This text has been posted on the blog [international-education.blog](#) and it is available in different languages on [international-education.blog](#)

Volante, L., Schnepf, S.V., Jerrim, J. & Klinger, D.A. (2019). PISA, socioeconomic achievement gaps, and education policies. Retrieved from <https://international-education.blog/en/pisa,-socioeconomic-achievement-gaps,-and-education-policies/>

The blog International-Education.Blog is an outcome of the project OCCAM. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 76500.



³ https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/fairness_pb2019_educational_inequalities.pdf