



Uncovering school-level influences on equal educational opportunities in secondary education

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Background & relevance

Despite international frameworks like the Salamanca Statement and Convention on the Rights of the Child, **persistent inequalities continue to persist in (secondary) education.**

While considerable research examines individual factors at the pupil and teacher levels, there remains a critical gap in understanding how **school-level environments** systematically influence educational equality.



Equal educational opportunities: beyond access

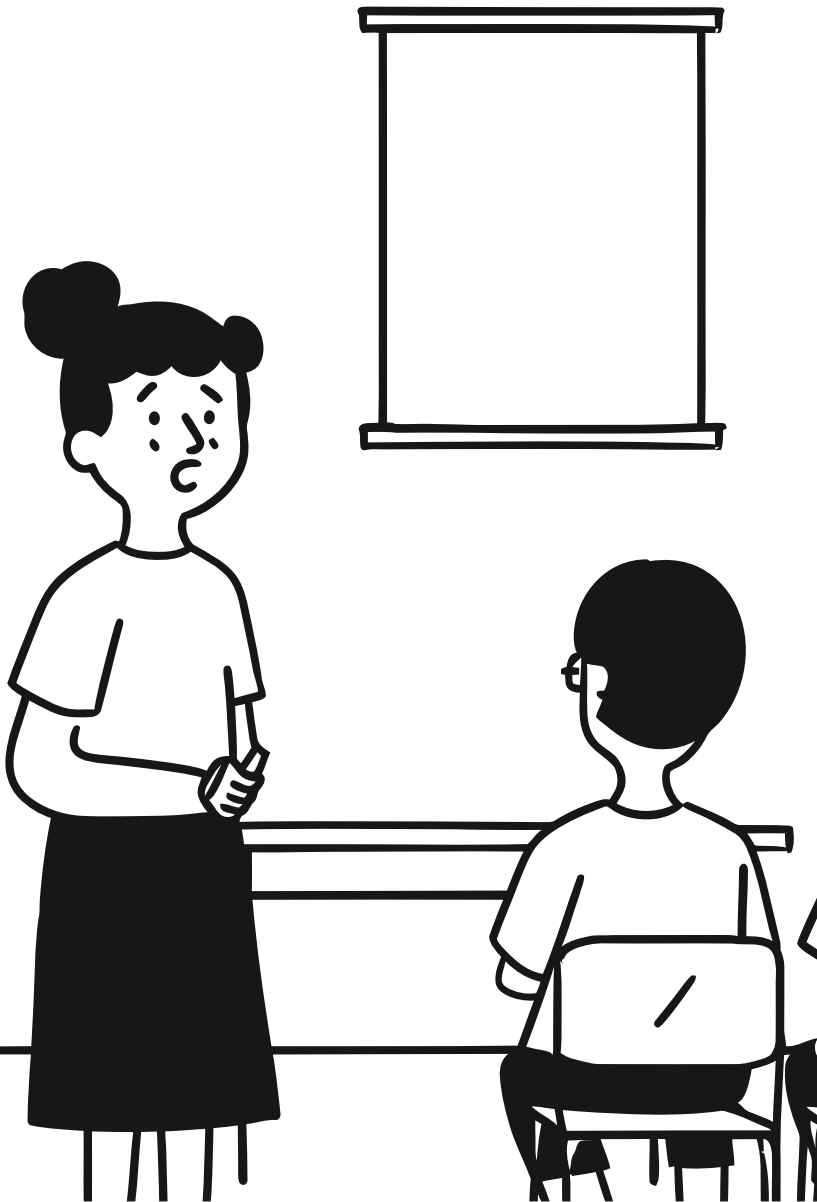
Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO) extends far beyond simply compensating for pupils from disadvantaged or underserved groups. It encompasses quality education for **all pupils** regardless of their background.

Beyond access

Focuses on participation, learning outcomes, and meaningful engagement

Universal fairness

Relates to inclusive education while emphasizing fair chances for everyone





Education and inequity: the school's role

Education is often seen as a driver of social mobility, yet paradoxically, it also reproduces inequalities. Schools can unintentionally reinforce social divisions rather than overcome them.

This presentation examines how schools as organizations—not just the individuals within them—shape (or hinder) educational equity, and why we need to shift our perspective to address systemic issues.

School environment as a shaper of (In)equality

Schools are not neutral spaces—they actively shape equality or inequality through their organizational contexts.

Micro-level Factors

- Teachers and their practices
- Attitudes and beliefs
- Classroom interactions

Meso-level Factors

- Student grouping policies
- Support structures
- Leadership approaches
- School culture and climate

Note: This study deliberately shifts the lens from individuals to the school environment as a whole.

Theoretical framework

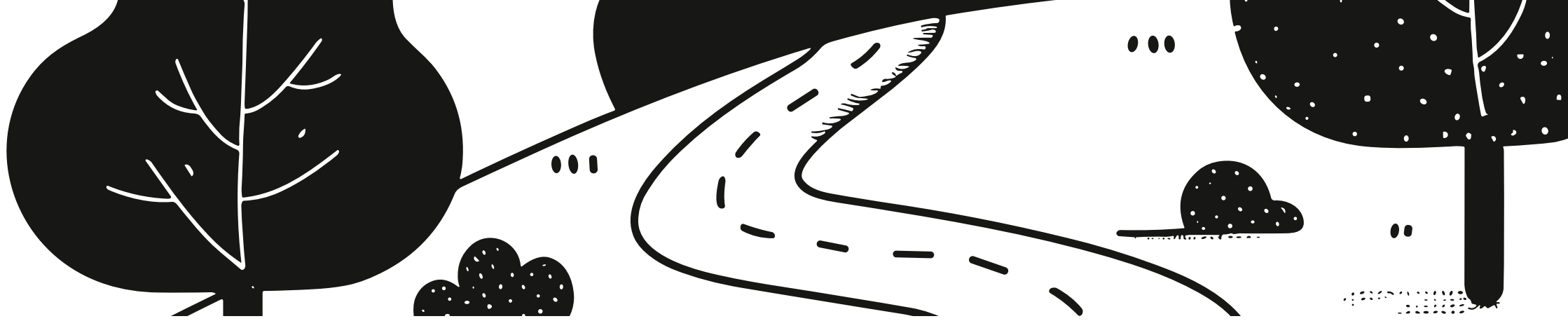
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Recognizes that development occurs within nested systems of influence, from microsystems (direct interactions) to macrosystems (cultural contexts)

Struyf's SEED Model

Specifically examines school environment for educational development, emphasizing the responsibility of schools in creating conditions for equal opportunities

These complementary frameworks help us understand **how schools function as complex ecosystems that can either promote or hinder educational equity.**



Secondary education: a critical turning point

1

Decision points

Tracking, grouping, and transition decisions strongly affect pupils' trajectories

2

structural Impact

Curriculum, programs, and support systems have long-term effects

3

research gap

Most EEO research at this level remains fragmented

Secondary education is where inequalities often become **most visible and persistent**, making it particularly relevant for studying equal opportunities.

The research focus problem

Individual pupil focus

Research primarily examines pupils' backgrounds and achievement levels, often tracking individual outcomes without considering institutional context.

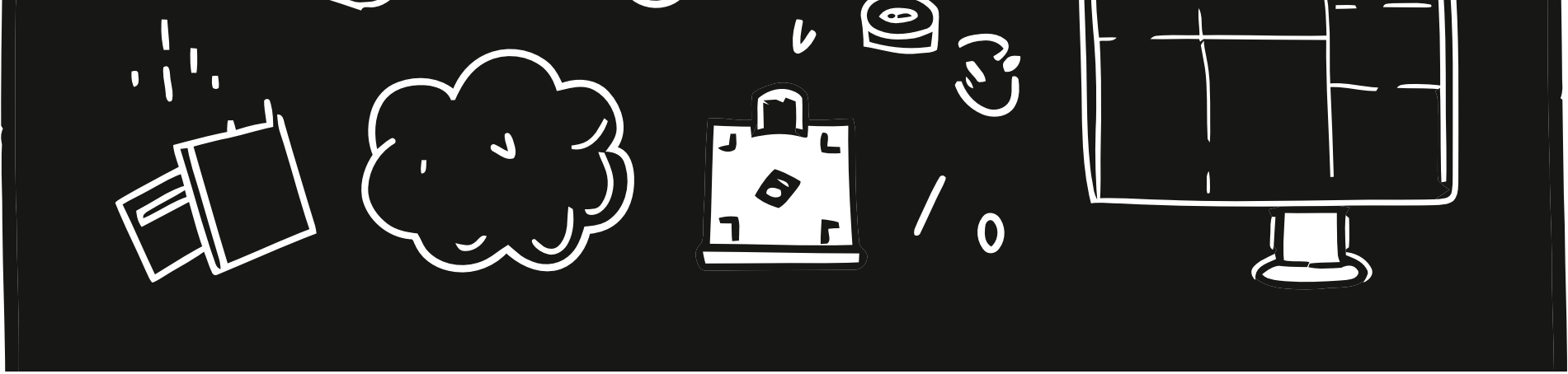
Individual teacher focus

Studies analyze teachers' attitudes and classroom practices, placing responsibility for outcomes on individual educators.

This narrow focus creates two significant problems:

- Overemphasis on **individual responsibility** for educational outcomes and inequities
- under-estimation of the **school as an organization** in shaping those outcomes





Research gap & our aim

i Despite the importance of school-level factors, there are significant gaps in our understanding:

Limited research

Few studies examine **school-level influences** on equal educational opportunities.

Missing connections

Even less research on how micro-level (classroom) and meso-level (school) factors interact within the complex school ecosystem.

Our aim

To systematically review school-level factors influencing equal educational opportunities in secondary education, providing a foundation for more effective interventions.

Research questions

1

Micro-Level factors

What are the micro-level factors of key actors (in the school environment) that promote EEO in secondary schools?

2

Meso-Level factors

What are the meso-level factors (in the school environment) that promote EEO in secondary schools?

3

Interaction effects

How do these micro and meso-level factors interplay with each other in the context of promoting EEO in secondary schools?

Methodology

Systematic literature review

- Following PRISMA guidelines for transparency
- Databases: Web of Science & ERIC
- Timeframe: 2003–2023 (20-year span)
- Rigorous inclusion/exclusion criteria

Final Sample

14

Total Studies

3

Quantitative

8

Qualitative

3

Mixed Methods

Conceptual approach



Search strategy

Key terms: "educational equality," "school environment," "secondary education," "organizational factors"

Focus: School environment variables rather than individual pupil characteristics

Quality assessment

Used Quality Assessment Tool for Studies with Diverse Designs (QATSDD)

Ensured methodological rigor across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies

Micro-Level findings

Teacher attitudes & beliefs

Strong influence on pupils' educational opportunities

- Labeling and stereotyping
- Gender and cultural bias
- Expectations for achievement

Language of instruction

Critical factor for inclusion/exclusion

- Plurilingual pedagogies promote equity
- Monolingual approaches disadvantage ELL students
- Teacher language competencies matter

Micro-level factors directly shape students' daily educational experiences and often reflect unconscious biases that require intentional intervention.

Meso-Level findings (1)

Pupil grouping & tracking

Often reinforces existing inequalities:

- Subjective placement criteria
- Limited mobility between tracks
- Teacher bias in recommendations
- Concentration of resources in higher tracks

Student support programs

Can mitigate educational inequalities:

- Targeted academic interventions
- Social-emotional support systems
- Culturally responsive practices
- Individualized learning plans



Meso-Level findings (2)



Teacher professionalization

Critical for promoting equity through:

- Diversity training
- Cultural competency development
- Collaborative learning communities



Leadership practices

Shape professional learning communities by:

- Setting equity-focused vision
- Allocating resources strategically
- Modeling inclusive behaviors

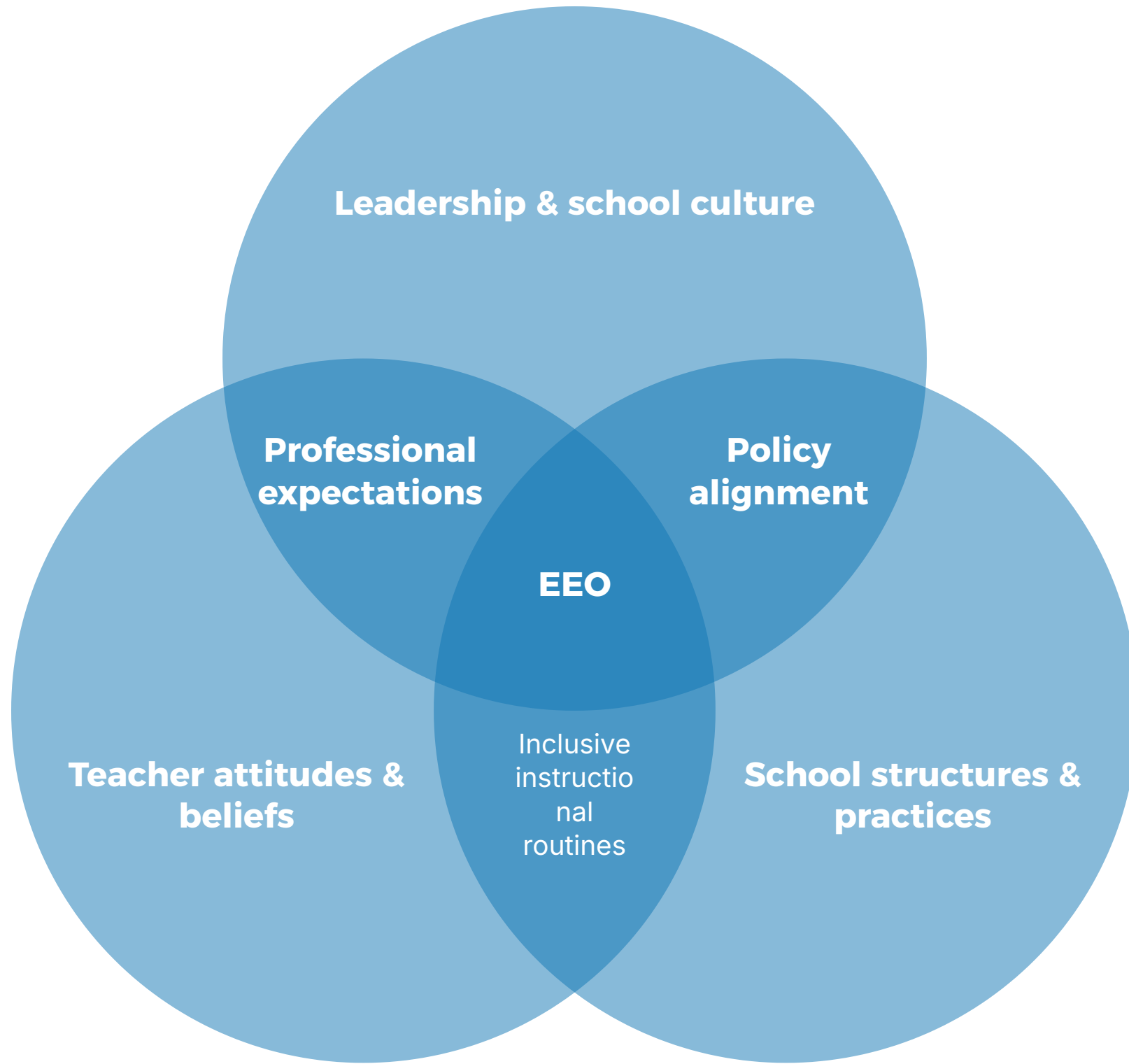


School culture & climate

Establishes diversity as a core value through:

- Inclusive policies
- Representation in curriculum
- Community engagement

Interplay of factors



Our analysis reveals that **the interplay between micro and meso-level factors remains significantly underexplored in the literature**, pointing to a critical gap in understanding how these elements function as an integrated system.

Key role of leadership



Policy-practice mediator

School leaders translate district and state policies into actionable practices that directly impact classroom experiences



Culture builder

Leadership sets the tone for school culture, influencing how diversity and inclusion are valued throughout the organization



Professional growth catalyst

Leaders direct resources toward teacher professionalization that builds capacity for equitable practices

Leadership emerges as **the pivotal lever for systemic change** toward equal educational opportunities



Discussion

Research gaps

- **Interplay analysis:** Few studies examine how factors interact across levels
- **Methodological limitations:** Need for more holistic, integrated research approaches
- **Geographical bias:** Literature heavily U.S.-centric, limiting global applicability
- **Longitudinal understanding:** Limited evidence on sustainability of interventions over time



Critical limitation

Current research often treats school-level factors as isolated variables rather than as components of an interconnected ecosystem



Implications



For research

- Develop integrated, multi-level research designs
- Prioritize qualitative and mixed-methods approaches
- Examine interactions between micro and meso factors
- Expand geographic diversity of studies



For practice

- Foster equity-driven school cultures
- Invest in leadership development
- Implement systematic teacher professionalization
- Review and reform tracking/grouping practices
- Align resource allocation with equity goals

Our findings highlight the need for **systemic approaches that address multiple levels simultaneously**.

Conclusion & key takeaways

Schools function as complex systems that can either **mitigate or reinforce educational inequalities** through their structures, practices, and cultures.

Positive teacher attitudes

Addressing implicit biases and developing culturally responsive practices

Inclusive culture

Valuing diversity and embedding equity in everyday practices



Equitable structures

Fair grouping practices and comprehensive student support systems

Strong leadership

The connecting factor that aligns vision, resources, and practices

Equal educational opportunities require intentional, coordinated efforts across all school levels.