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# Comparative perspectives on educational inequalities in Europe: an overview of the old and emergent inequalities from a bottom-up perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Educational inequalities remain a major challenge to the social cohesion of modern societies. They affect the younger generations in the society throughout their development and are also becoming more varied and entrenched. Although most inequalities are linked to socio-economic factors such as income, access to material resources, educational attainment, and social class, new emergent types of inequalities are developing rapidly: spatial segregation, residence status (native-born or immigrant) (Barnes, J. (2007). *Down our way: The relevance of neighbourhoods for parenting and child development*. Chichester: Wiley. ISBN 9780470030721; Lareau, A. (2014). Schools, housing and the reproduction of inequality. In A. Lareau & K. A. Goyette (Eds.), *Choosing homes, choosing schools* (pp. 169–206). New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Lareau, A. (2015). Cultural knowledge and social inequality. *American Sociological Review* 2015, 80(1), 1–27. doi:10.117/0003122414565814); and the digital divide (Bynner, J., & Heinz, W. R. (2021). *Youth prospects in the digital society: Identities and inequalities in an unravelling Europe*. Bristol: Policy Press; Melhuish, E. (2019). *House of commons education committee (2019). Tackling disadvantage in the early years*. London: HMSO. Tackling disadvantage in the early years (parliament.uk)). The use of in-depth evidence about the nature and variations in experiences of inequalities by individuals, families, communities within and across European countries is an effective way to provide up-to-date insights into evolving inequalities and the social problems that arise. This paper shifts the focus of the debate about the changing nature of inequalities in modern societies by drawing upon qualitative and mixed methods advances in studying socially disadvantaged groups. Their chances to integrate into society through the educational channels are not likely to be fully achieved without significant change in the current social environment and re-organisation of education systems. The paper draws its conclusions based on recent research and analytical reports with a focus on Europe.


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## Why educational inequalities matter

The skills needed for good life chances in post-industrial societies are becoming more extensive and complex. There are, however, great differences between individuals, linked to disadvantage. Disadvantaged children are more likely to be less successful in school, to have poorer health and to engage in crime and other problems later in life. The impact of socio-economic (and cultural) conditions in the family background on children's educational outcomes is well documented in early childhood (Melhuish et al., 2015; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), in primary school (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Gustafsson, Hansen, & Rosén, 2013) and in secondary education (Marks, Cresswell, & Ainley, 2006), as well as for educational transitions and final educational attainment (Breen, Luijkx, Muller, & Pollak, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). For children and young people from ethnic minorities, the experience of being marginalised and discriminated constitutes a risk factor in its own right (García Coll & Magnuson, 2000; Nurse, 2013, 2016).

The impact of social origins on child outcomes and wellbeing has persisted since records have been kept and is even increasing. Lack of the social relationship, economic resources and access to good basic and further education for young people from lower class and non-indigenous backgrounds may prevent them from acquiring management skills to 'become an agent for one's biographical future' (Bynner & Heinz, 2021, pp. 34–45) in digitised economies and societies. The consequence of these inequalities is an enormous waste of talent and sometimes a threat to social cohesion (Pickett, 2014). The potential contribution to society of individuals who grow up at disadvantage is far greater than often realised, and there is an extra load on society's resources since disadvantaged people frequently show a greater need for state support throughout their lives (Melhuish, 2014).

There are moral, social and economic imperatives – as societies with more disadvantage and poorer skills are less able to adapt to a world demanding higher levels of productivity to maintain living standards. These problems are exacerbated over time as increasingly technologically advanced societies need more adaptable and technically skilled populations. In reality, the aims of equality and future productivity merge. In addressing these issues, all policies relevant to social exclusion and educational reform need to be integrated, with policies recognising that learning capabilities are primarily formed during childhood, particularly early childhood (Heckman, 2006), and which act to improve life chances (Melhuish, 2019). This suggests that identification of the main stakeholders of educational development and mechanism of their involvement in education might be a way forward in mitigation of the impact of inequalities on the life chances of younger generations.

## Equal access to education as a social problem

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, during the time of lockdowns and social distancing, the attention of societies, education practitioners and policy makers, parents and carers has been increasingly drawn to the issue of (un)equal access to education (Andrew et al., 2020; Bynner & Heinz, 2021; Thompson & Ivinson, 2020). Unequal access to educational resources through distance and home learning, which for decades had

been compensated by the development of educational facilities, became a new emergent type of educational inequality and further highlighted the social aspect of inequalities which show as a social problem. For many decades, access to high-quality education has been widely seen as a key to solving inequalities. A report sponsored by UNICEF in 2018 'An Unfair Start. Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries' (Innocenti, 2018) referred to the UN's Global Goal for Sustainable Development 4.1: 'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes'. The report highlighted the main causes of educational inequalities such as parental occupation, migration background, gender and differences between schools. The significance of the report's findings (which provides an overview on educational inequalities in 41 of the world's richest countries) is that rich countries, which include most European countries, vary widely on the gap between the educational achievement and of rich and poor children. Having analysed inequalities from access to early childhood education to expectations of post-secondary education, it provided a coherent picture on the equality of access to education in those countries and clearly demonstrated that countries' wealth is not a guarantor of educational equality. Often, economically wealthier Western European countries are outranked by much poorer European countries, such as Portugal and Eastern European nations (Innocenti, 2018).

The UNICEF report (Innocenti, 2018) also confirmed findings from earlier and recent empirical studies reporting that girls consistently do better than boys and that immigrant children do less well than non-migrant children in most countries (Erdem-Möbius, Odağ, & Anders, 2021; Thompson & Iverson, 2020) although in some countries second-generation immigrant children have started outperforming non-migrant children, and there are wide variations amongst different ethnic groups.

However, 'educators cannot compensate for social policies that have an effect outside of school' (BERA Research Commission report 2016 cited from Thompson & Iverson, 2020, p. 4), and family background is a key driver of attainment and inequalities. Children from lower social class backgrounds continue to lag behind their peers from higher social class backgrounds from preschool onwards. Following the WWII period, when the regular observations started, the correlation between lower social classes and educational attainment has been persistently strong. Despite initiatives at national (e.g. introduction of the welfare state) and regional levels (e.g. parenting support), the problem of educational inequality remains. For example, for some families, affordability of preschool and child-care create a barrier to access (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2001; 2008), and in countries where there is a greater gap between rich and poor families, fewer children overall attend preschool services. In London, for example, even when there is some free preschool provision, children from more affluent areas are most likely to take up places. Educational inequalities are also worse when there is more segregation of disadvantaged children from their more advantaged peers so that disadvantaged children attain more in educational settings where they mix with more advantaged peers (Melhuish et al., 2008).

It is not surprising that the UNICEF report was cautious in their proposals to reduce educational inequalities. They called for better data and more attention to variations in attainment and equality rather than average attainment, more attention to gender stereotypes and the gender mix of the teaching profession, and a focus on basic skills and more

information 'on all children, including those who are missing from standard surveys', for example, Roma children (Innocenti, 2018, p. 47). They also called for high-quality early education and care for all children but stopped short of suggesting it should be free for all. However, for true equality, cost barriers must be removed. In their boldest proposal, they suggested that welfare and benefits for families and less socioeconomic segregation in schools would mitigate educational inequalities.

## Changing family structures and educational systems

According to the theoretical model of bio-ecological systems as proposed and developed by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), personal development results from the recurrent interactions of a person with his or her immediate environment across the lifespan. These individual-level interactions within the immediate environment (micro-system) are referred to as proximal processes. A person participates in several micro-systems (e.g. family, peer group and classroom) and connections between micro-systems are referred to as meso-systems. The connections between meso-systems form an exo-system. The totality of peoples' micro-, meso- and exo-systems is embedded within the societal macro-system. Finally, the model takes change and development over time into account, which is called the chrono-system.

One of the essential parts of Bronfenbrenner's model is the meso-system, within which family and parents engage with school activities that may promote child development and well-being. For family engagement in education systems to be efficient family (parents) and education systems have to be partners. Recent research on the concepts of family and parental involvement has emphasised reciprocity and shared responsibility between family and school programmes and recognised that schools play an important role in supporting families and encouraging them to become actively involved in schools (Forry, Wessel, Simkin, & Rodrigues, 2012). At the same time, parents from the disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds, who are among the main stakeholders of child education, often remain bystanders or even outsiders in the education system. Creation of mechanisms of empowerment of parents in their involvement in the education systems, civil society organisations, and teacher-parent associations are necessary to enhance the effectiveness and transparency of education systems.

A crucial question is to understand how European national and local education systems recognise and incorporate families' strengths and resources. Following a broad overview of existing approaches, available evidence and good practices, an in-depth investigation provides a basis for the formulation of recommendations for the development and implementation of parent- and family-focused support programmes, and potentially system redefinition and change.

Recent research has identified changing patterns of involvement with the education systems for parents from varied backgrounds (Delcroix, 2021; Lee et al. 2014; Nurse, 2020; Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2021; Pastori, Mussi, Capelli, & Francot, 2021). It illuminates families' 'concerted cultivation', which is typically pursued by advantaged families, and involves intensive school engagement, participation in extra-curricular activities, and extensive educational materials in the home. This approach can promote a sense of confidence among children, creating a cultural edge in educational settings,

and this has been supported by quantitative studies (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015; Cheadle, 2009; Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Irwin & Elley, 2011). However, the socio-economic status of families, along with racial/ethnic differences, remain the major correlates of parents' use of concerted cultivation. Thus, different forms of social support might be of specific importance for reaching the diverse group of disadvantaged parents and families. Tailored support would provide new insights and allow for new and more appropriate parental actions and engagement and may contribute to a better understanding of educational systems and services. This, in turn, may strengthen the school–parent collaboration. Parenting or family support programmes strive to help parents to create safe, nurturing and stimulating family environments. The potential effectiveness of parental interventions has been demonstrated in a number of domains of learning and development (Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt, & Leseman, 2005; Hachfeld, Anders, Kuger, & Smidt, 2016; Leseman & Van Tuijl, 2001; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004) but these may need to be fine-tuned for different parental needs.

### Inequality in opportunities for education

In general, the educational opportunities of children in disadvantaged families are unequal, that is, the chances to succeed are smaller for them as compared to non-disadvantaged groups (Delhaxhe et al., 2009; Engle et al., 2011; OECD, 2012) and research has indicated that risk factors act cumulatively (Atzaba-Poria, Pike, & Deater-Deckard, 2004). These inequalities include the opportunities the system offers, the opportunity for access and to take advantage of these opportunities, which differ markedly in relation to disadvantage in diverse societies.

However, there is a need to distinguish between social and educational inequalities. Social inequalities refer to processes whereby resources are distributed unevenly, typically through norms of allocation related to socially defined groups. For example, access to social goods can be uneven for groups that are defined by power, religion, class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Educational inequalities refer to the unequal distribution of academic resources, including early childhood education and school funding, qualified and experienced pedagogical staff, books, learning materials and technologies. Often, the unequal distribution is related to group membership (e.g. geographical – location/within districts or cities, region, urban/rural, wealth, ethnicity, religion, language spoken at home). A common indicator of the absence of educational equity is the variation in attainment (competencies, scores, etc.) that is related to socioeconomic status, or Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS; OECD, 2013). Additionally, inter-individual and inter-group differences distinguish between inequality and dispersion in educational opportunity; inequality referring to variation between individual children's abilities, learning efforts and opportunities, whereas dispersion refers to variation explained by group characteristics such as the socio-economic status, ethnicity, migration status or gender.

This inequity is closely related to intergenerational social mobility, and to moral concepts incorporating an open society ensuring equal chances. Much literature on inequality of opportunity has considered the association between status characteristics, educational attainment and social stratification (e.g. occupation, or social class), and how these associations differ between countries and change over time (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Thus, inequality in educational attainment may conflict with equal

opportunities by hampering intergenerational mobility in income and socio-economic status (Corak, 2004). In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to establish how educational institutions and systems may compensate or amplify inequalities by shaping opportunities for children's development.

Whereas recent research addressed social gaps in achievement in North America, Australia and the UK (Bradbury, Corak, Waldfogel, & Washbrook, 2015; Feinstein, 2003; Lareau, 2014, 2015; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Collins, & Miller, 2015), there is little comparative research among European countries that provides up-to-date knowledge on the role of early education in tackling inequalities. However, the variation in educational gaps and trajectories across different European states, systems and regions, could provide information for identifying successful or poor educational policies, strategies and practices in order to tackle inequalities. There is even less European comparative perspective that includes western European and eastern and central European post-Socialist countries, which could fill a knowledge vacuum and enlarge the context of discussion in ways that may better reveal the roles of early education, comprehensive and inclusive schooling and family support programmes for effectively tackling inequalities and enhancing equal opportunities for children from less-advantaged families.

The Polish (Gajek & Marchlik, 2021) and Czech (Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2021) studies of native-born low-income families (Poland) and families of Roma minority (Czech Republic) in this issue clearly demonstrate how recent economic and social changes affected educational aspirations and lives of mothers and their children in post-Socialist countries. For example, the decline of the Polish heavy industry since the collapse of socialism changed the focus of the education plans for individuals from working-class families. Those who were employed in the industries ended up being unemployed and did not have adequate competencies for the new market situation due to having vocational education skills. The mass unemployment resulted in severe social problems among these groups: poverty, alcoholism and violence (Gajek & Marchlik, 2021). However, as Gajek and Marchlik (2021) argued in their analysis of the Polish situation, women who suffered the most were from poor families, who were not able to get higher education; whereas highly educated people had adapted to the new reality more easily. For individuals from poor families, higher education was considered to be an investment in themselves and protection from poverty in adulthood. The child's education however was also associated with big effort and sacrifices of the families along with higher expectations towards their children achievement which was demonstrated by the Polish researchers (pp.11–12).

### **Why in-depth knowledge of parents' experience of the educational system can contribute to the educational changes regarding their children**

Working from an assumption that two factors are crucial for parents' educational aspirations for their children: parents' educational attainments and their proximity to their children's education, a recent study where the prime focus was on mothers of pre-school and primary school children in ten European countries considered these issues (Nurse & Melhuish, 2018). Apart from describing the main problems experienced by disadvantaged mothers (due to economic, educational or immigrant, ethnic minority backgrounds) in



providing their children with the basics for growing and entering society with better life chances, the qualitative study identified barriers for disadvantaged parents involvement with children's schooling, such as individual and social, racial and religious issues. Moreover, the data also presented parents' response to these barriers.

One factor influencing the involvement of mothers from low-income families in England and France in their children's schooling was their biographical experience of schooling, also observed in the studies by Hornby and Blackwell (2018) over two decades. The qualitative study using biographical narrative methods (Nurse & Melhuish, 2018) provided insight into the meaning of that experience: the ways it affected mothers and how mothers' experience affects their children. Mothers' life and educational experiences intersected with their views and plans for their children's education and their strategies to achieve this. Consideration should be given to how they deal with modern education, when some had not been able to benefit from education in their youth, as found in England (Nurse, 2020) and in Poland (Gajek & Marchlik, 2021). Thus, the educational trajectories of women from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be linear, as the balance between formal, non-formal and informal education varies reflecting their biographies, so they 'develop their own way' in negotiating their educational careers (Nurse, 2020; Wright, 2011).

The interrelationship between immigrant mothers' biographical experiences and involvement in their children's schooling was also identified in France (Broekhuizen et al., 2019). It was found that they experienced education differently depending on their own experience and whether they were educated in their country of origin or in France. For example, it could determine their choice of schools; state or private for their children, and French mothers considered private schooling for their children as a guarantee of a positive environment for their children. French parents regarded it as important that the educational environment was in line with the values and practices of the families, but the actual choice of school was primarily influenced by the mother's own education. Those who had been brought in a family in which literature played an important role in education and where openness to other cultures was significant tended to have higher educational and professional aspirations for their children.

Choosing a private school was, for immigrant families in France, a strategy to mitigate against the disadvantages of the neighbourhood where they lived (Broekhuizen et al., 2019). For example, an immigrant mother from a working-class neighbourhood in Paris worried about the environment in which her children were growing up and felt that the social environment of her neighbourhood was not in line with her educational principles, so she enrolled her son in a private Catholic school. When asked for clarification regarding her concerns, she confirmed that it was the environment in which her children were growing up that scared her, as it could affect the children's personalities.

Private Muslim schools also can be chosen as an alternative to poor state schools. State schools often caused a lot of disappointment for the mother and the family. According to some mothers of immigrant backgrounds (Broekhuizen et al., 2019), the private Muslim schools embodied the religious values that they and their families want to transfer to their children along with the educational skills and knowledge.

As described by Broekhuizen et al. (2019) in respect of several countries, mothers whose children went to the local school often had concerns about the school's environment, observance health and safety issues, insecurity, low education of other children and



segregation. Thus the school environment becomes a crucial factor for moving schools instead of moving homes (which most of them cannot afford), and they may seek to enrol their child in a school in a better neighbourhood, including private schools, thus defying the prescribed belonging in the absence of 'elective belonging' which is commonly not available to low-income and immigrant families (Barnes, 2007; Erdem-Möbius et al., 2021; Jeffery, 2018). Their motive was to secure their child access to a better quality education. As described by Pastori et al. (2021) immigrant mothers in Italy typically welcomed any opportunities to continue their professional careers to enable access to better schooling since they were keen for their children to get access to high-quality education. In addition, Italian Moroccan mothers set an example to their children by acquiring the language skills and knowledge of the host society while maintaining their cultural identities.

If the interaction between schools and mothers from a low-income, non-immigrant background in England (Nurse, 2020) and low-income immigrant background in France (Broekhuizen et al., 2019) revolved around social and access issues, similar parent-school interactions pose additional barriers for ethnic minority groups, for example, the Roma. For many decades Roma children and parents have experienced both open and hidden discrimination (Amnesty International, 2010). Roma mothers have developed life strategies to overcome obstacles and barriers in the interests of their own children. Findings from the Czech Republic (Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2021) and Greece (Strataki & Petrogiannis, 2020) demonstrated how the Romany mothers coped with education systems. Racially based obstacles, created by the stigmatization of the Roma families in Czech Republic, resulting in particular types of communication between schools and families, described as 'oppressive', leading to a low level of trust for educational institutions as well as having a negative impact on families' sense of belonging and identities. However, the parents' 'coping strategies', which includes equipping their children with 'coping tools', were identified by the Czech researchers as increasing their disadvantages and inequality. A significant finding was that, despite their social disadvantages, Romany mothers in the Czech Republic were likely to report being competent parents, who supported the needs of their children and were willing to establish good relations with schools (Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2021).

The qualitative study of immigrant, Roma and low-income mothers in 10 European countries (Nurse et al., 2019) highlighted the importance of primary schools in bridging cultures and building relationships between the host societies and immigrant communities, which could support the well-being and integration of both mother and child (Pastori et al., 2021). Simultaneously, cultural, linguistic and relational misunderstandings became obstacles that created barriers, instead of building upon positive contacts and exchanges. However, comments during the interviews suggested that mothers did not always think that schools saw their role as important hubs of intercultural communication. This qualitative study revealed a complex picture of multiple patterns of educational inequalities that went beyond the obvious measurable indicators of family backgrounds and educational attainments, including parents' aspirations, which can be regarded as a 'double cultural mediation' between the heritage culture and that of the host country. Such factors are often considered in an analysis of the quality of communication between the education system and parents.

The focus on low-income mothers in the quantitative and qualitative studies (Broekhuizen et al., 2019) enabled a view across European countries explored the nature of poverty and inequalities with reflections on the experience of being disadvantaged. While generalisation should be cautious, the analysis demonstrated the potential dangers of stereotyping 'disadvantaged' mothers and families (e.g. perception of people who are too lazy to work so just receive their benefits). There is also a strong connection between disadvantage and educational attainment of parents, and lack of work for disadvantaged mothers exacerbates their disadvantage (Nurse & Melhuish, 2019).

Often accompanying poverty, homeless or unstable housing circumstances and lone parenthood are quite common amongst disadvantaged groups (Borgen Project, 2018). However, many circumstances can cause mothers to feel disadvantaged (e.g. lack of family support; poor and unsafe neighbourhoods, children's learning or behavioural disorders; mothers' or family members' disability or illness; bullying at schools, etc.) and these factors vary from family to family, neighbourhood to neighbourhood and country to country (Nurse, 2020).

### **Qualitative, bottom-up research provides up-to-date knowledge and 'missing' data on the evolving inequalities**

Material deprivation is a core characteristic of being disadvantaged in that poverty and lack of material goods, create an exclusion for families with young children. The ISOTIS project interviews across Europe with low-income, immigrant or Roma families (Nurse et al., 2019) demonstrated that raising children in disadvantaged families is still primarily the mother's duty. Mothers often bring up children alone whilst struggling economically, which can create a feeling that they are being looked 'down' upon by others, causing them to voluntarily withdraw from social life – except for communication channels associated with their children (Nurse & Melhuish, 2019). Despite the continuously changing position of women in European societies, most of the changes have made little impact on the mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds, be they native-born low socio-economic status or of immigrant background or from ethnic minorities (OECD, 2017). Modern European welfare states primarily address the problem of material deprivation through a system of social benefits to the families or through supporting financially children's access to pre-primary education and care. However, there is also the phenomenon of the 'benefits' trap, whereby parents may not find it economically worthwhile to seek employment while losing benefits and hence this affects not only employment but also integration into the host society (Baetjer, 2016; Kay, 2009).

There is a need for in-depth knowledge of the consequences of the spatial segregation that results in segregation of children within the school system and which, in turn, creates social exclusion. In tandem with segregation, perceived quality differences between educational institutions should be recognised. These quality differences appear to be linked to types of neighbourhood and areas where families of certain social class and ethno-cultural background reside (Delcroix 2021; Erdem-Möbius et al., 2021). Governmental support may decrease educational inequalities, but it does not eliminate them. Housing policies can create 'cul-de-sac' types of neighbourhoods, which are often almost wholly disadvantaged with their own sub-culture that may contradict mainstream culture, and lead to increased social exclusion and segregation. Spatial segregation is

often much worse in the case of ethnic minority groups (e.g. Roma families in the study by Strataki & Petrogiannis, 2020)

There would seem to be a role for primary schools in bridging cultures and building relationships between the host societies and immigrant communities, thus supporting the well-being and integration of both children and parents. Schools and especially primary schools are important in bridging cultures and building relationships between the host societies and immigrant communities, and this supports the well-being and integration of both mother and child. Simultaneously, cultural, linguistic and relational misunderstandings become obstacles that create barriers, instead of building upon positive contacts and exchanges. (Broekhuizen et al., 2019)

The bottom-up qualitative approach, especially using biographical methods, increases the time span of reflections on education systems, which starts with parents own childhood and early experiences of schooling and covers their experiences of raising child(ren), as well as comparing the parental and child experiences (Nurse, 2020). The use of a biographical approach is also appropriate due to its suitability for reaching the most vulnerable groups of the population and giving voices to 'silent' minorities (Nurse & O'Neill, 2018), where the timeline in the stories enabled researchers to capture the dynamics of education and social support systems in the last two decades. Narrative interpretative analysis of biographical interviews can provide deeper insight into mothers' perceptions and experiences of inequalities, and their responding strategies (Nurse, 2020; Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2021; Strataki & Petrogiannis, 2020).

The papers in this special issue advance scholarship by providing fresh perspectives on the lives of disadvantaged families. Such perspectives require new research that more thoroughly integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide knowledge that is congruent with the perspectives of disadvantaged families. Additionally, the papers point to possible directions for policy development, such as integrating the perspectives of disadvantaged families into the operation of services for families from pregnancy to adulthood, with health, housing and education services needing policy realignment and staff development on the role of services in alleviating disadvantage. However, such new policy directions would require political commitment at the highest level as well as attention to bottom-up governance (Connolly, Barnes, Guerra, & Pyper, 2020) informed by insightful research.

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and biographical studies in European countries, and social policy development consultancy in the transitional countries of Eastern Europe. Her research and publications include international comparative studies of social mobility and education, identities and belonging, comparative inter-generational studies of cultural identities of ethnic minorities and migrants, cultural diversity, and well-being of families with children and young people for which she creatively applied methods of qualitative biographical research. In 2017–2019, she was lead designer and coordinator of the qualitative biographical study of mothers of primary and pre-primary school children from marginalised families in ten European countries in the EC Horizon- 2020 funded ISOTIS project. Lyudmila is Coordinator/Chair of Research Network 03 'Biographical Perspectives on European Societies' of the European Sociological Association and a member of the Cultural, Scientific and Medical Advisory Board of Music Mind Spirit Trust, UK.

**Edward Melhuish** is a professor of Human Development at the University of Oxford. He is an international research expert on longitudinal studies, child development, parenting and early learning and care, and social exclusion. He has been a leader of seminal longitudinal and policy studies including the Effective Pre-school, Primary & Secondary Education (EPPSE) project, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) and the National Evaluation of Sure Start and has been involved in international research across Europe and the world. He has undertaken research in 12 countries, including large-scale longitudinal studies in Norway, the UK, and Australia involving family, community and pre-school influences on child development, and policy implications. He was a director of the EU project (ISOTIS) on childhood inequality involving eleven countries, and an experienced contributor to policy development, nationally and internationally, as an advisor to OECD, UNESCO, WHO and the European Commission. In 2016 he was awarded an OBE for services to Social Science and undertakes substantial pro bono work for charities involved with child well-being, including being chair of the Foundation Years Trust.

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