

Beyond Individual Responsibility: Exploring the Role of Opportunity Structures in Learning Outcomes

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While EU integration policies primarily intend to close economic performance gaps between countries, extant literature identifies trends of increasing subnational disparities. This paper makes a plea for considering the subnational level as an important part of the analysis. For this reason, it will explore regional inequalities and their role in learning outcomes (LOs) in the 27 European member states from 2005 to 2021. In particular, we assume the co-dependency of LOs, (under)achievement and regional opportunity structures resulting from specific socio-economic conditions, education and labour market access, status, and family background. Individual LOs are strongly influenced by them. In the analysis, we will also consider the importance of timing, using the entry into the EU as an example of how European integration policies in distinct trajectories of geography, economy, culture, and demographics can play a role.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we provide an overview of regional disparity theories and research on territorial and socioeconomic inequalities. In the second part, we conduct a cluster analysis to identify regions' socioeconomic characteristics and significant spatial patterns of regional convergences and divergences based on indicators measuring opportunity structures. In the third part, we test the explanatory power of the identified clusters by checking for liaisons between the specific institutional arrangements, labour market characteristics, spatial and socio-economic contextualities and regionally aggregated LOs. We will do this by using indicators on learning outcomes and (under)achievement.

The descriptive exploration of spatial disparities in LOs will provide a basis for understanding the complex relationships between regional inequality and socioeconomic conditions across European countries and regions. The paper concludes by discussing the relevance of a context-sensitive interpretation of LOs.

Keywords: learning outcomes, (under)achievement, opportunities structures, spatial justice, socioeconomic inequalities