

# CHALLENGES FACED IN PIONEERING PRACTICES TACKLING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN EUROPE

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**Abstract:** One of the most significant aspects of increased inequalities in society are those pertaining to educational inequality, or disparities related to access, uptake and completion of education. Of decisive interest in this context are challenges and dilemmas facing practices which try to tackle or mitigate educational inequalities. Although research on the topic has developed considerably in the last two decades, there is still a lack of research looking at concrete practice from an internationally comparative perspective. Through qualitative practice research, including problem-centred expert interviews, focus groups and guided tours, we have investigated the challenges and dilemmas which obstruct the implementation, development and day-to-day activities of educational practices.

We introduce this article by providing our theoretical perspectives on educational equality and its necessary pre-conditions. We argue in favour of a much more emancipatory educational practice in the sense of a Freire-inspired ideal of fostering participation, self-determination and solidarity in both formal and non-formal educational environments. These theoretical considerations are then related to concrete practices, whereby we focus on the perspectives of stakeholders and educational practitioners involved such as teachers, social workers, non-formal educators or coaches. Based on our empirical material we move on to reflect on challenges and dilemmas faced in such practices. We systematise these cross-national challenges into seven categories which we have labelled 'The seven Ps', namely: Politics, Placement, Partnerships, Provision, Personnel, Parents, and Participants. We conclude by explaining why this framework should be applicable to development education, arguing how these categories may serve as a cautionary framework for developing pioneering practices striving for social justice across the global community.

**Key words:** Educational Inequality; Educational Practice; Alternative Education; Comparative Research; Practice-Research.

## Introduction

### *Background*

Social inequality inhibits economic growth, concentrates power, reduces trust in the state and between citizens in society, and increases tensions that often lead to social conflict. Increased social inequality also has an impact on physical and mental health and even life expectancy (Goldblatt et al., 2023). Looking at current developments, it is clear that income equality, net income and social benefits have declined in several European countries since 2008 (Mascherini and Litardi, 2019) and that child poverty in particular is increasing rapidly (Goldblatt et al., 2023).

One of the most crucial and lasting facets of increasing inequality in society is educational inequality, which encompasses inequalities in access to education, participation in education, educational qualifications and throughout the life of the learner (Farrel, 1999: 159). However, schools still serve as an instrument for social reproduction (Bourdieu, 2018) and circumstantial factors like parents' education and socioeconomic status still have significant bearings on children's academic performance (Nordahl and Nordahl, 2023). Voices getting louder are calling for a flexibilisation of educational institutions and a strengthening of the cooperation between policy-makers, educational institutions, local community actors and social services, in order to provide children and young adults with an educational programme that is suitable for them, regardless of their social, cultural or economic background. Thereupon it may be possible to reverse the trend of increased inequality that has characterised both European and international societies in recent years (Mascherini and Litardi, 2019; Nordahl and Nordahl, 2023).

Between 2021 and 2024, the Horizon 2020 project 'PIONEERED' has been doing just that - investigating alternative educational practices aiming to ensure the uptake and completion of education for children and young people across Europe. Through a collaboration between thirteen research institutions across nine European countries, PIONEERED uncovered a range of pioneering

educational practices with an outspoken ambition and distinct potential for reducing educational inequalities across Europe. Despite variations in governance, socioeconomics, educational ideology and stratification of learners in the PIONEERED participating countries, there are a striking number of commonalities. As the PIONEERED research reveals, practices that appear most successful in reducing inequalities are those that guarantee both individual support and recognition of personal and cultural identity and are based on an inclusive organisational structure, facilitated by predictable transitions between school levels/social domains and inter-professional educational collaboration (Tokheim et al., 2023).

However, the findings also indicate that these egalitarian educational practices are faced with similar challenges. With this article, we aim to break the silence on the societal barriers and challenges faced in pioneering practices tackling educational inequalities across Europe. We do so by giving a voice to practitioners with experience in working with children and youth in vulnerable conditions. Before we do this, we outline the central concepts of our research.

### ***Pioneering practices combating educational inequality***

Educational inequality occurs when access to, participation, and potential for success in education are unevenly distributed based on certain characteristics. This can manifest itself in enrolment, academic outcomes, and treatment within the education system. Educational inequalities are often studied using large-scale, international assessment studies (such as TIMSS/PISA), with respect to factors pertaining to economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) and various other intersectional characteristics. However, it has been reasoned several times over how such assessment studies, and the way the Western neoliberal education system is organised around competitiveness, stratification, and commodification of knowledge, often leads to the reproduction of power structures and consequential inequalities in education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1971; Jobst and Skrobaneck, 2024).

To combat the cycle of social reproduction, liberating practices are needed that change the system of oppressive ideologies and hierarchies in the sense of Freire (2000) and make room for consciousness and critical intervention

(*conscientização*) as well as participation, self-determination and solidarity (Klafki, 1999; Tokheim et al., 2024). In this sense, educational inequality is not perceived exclusively in terms of quantifiable indicators, but rather as a temporal, embedded, interlaced and interactive process (Yasunaga, 2014; Benz, Seiler and Erzinger, 2021; Council of Europe, 2023). One alternative answer to the problem of educational inequality is an increasing European presence of what we call pioneering practices. In this context, pioneering practices (PP) mean social organisations employing innovative strategies to mitigate educational inequalities. This entails solving social problems, empowering vulnerable groups, and/or improving capabilities and social relations in both formal, non-formal and informal educational settings. Such organisational structures may be *top-down* - formed and supervised through political/administrative legislature, or conversely, *bottom-up* - formed and run through grass roots initiatives at the local level (Jensen, Skrobaneck and Nagy, 2021). In this article, we use the term *stakeholders* (Friedman and Miles, 2006; Preskill and Jones, 2009; Boaz et al., 2018), referring to all parties concerned with the implementation, development and administration of, as well as additional requirements *for* and *of* PPs. The term *practitioner* is further used to describe those working directly with or at the PPs.

Their foci vary between all educational levels from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to higher education; from local to regional, to national levels; with learning happening in formal, non-formal and informal spaces; and since the practices are spread across several European countries with differing socioeconomic and cultural dispositions, PPs will pose different answers to similar questions. Further, while these PPs are all grounded in the European context, we believe the lessons learned from them are also relevant to an extended global context, and their shared goal of reducing educational inequalities closely align with the principals of the Code of Good Practice for development Education (IDEA, 2023). As such, PPs may be considered as tools for practitioners of development education.

### ***Challenges within education***

This article focuses on challenges to PPs (during implementation or maintenance), either sporadically or continuously, compromising their day-to-day activities and flow of operations. Here, ‘challenges’ are conceptualised as ‘hindering factors that

limit, delay or even prevent pioneering practices from implementing and realising strategies to mitigate educational inequality' (Tokheim et al., 2023: 5). Following research on the pedagogical profession, we assume that pioneering practices, like all pedagogical action, are characterised by contradictory processes that are inherent to professional practice (Schütze, 1996; Helsper, 2002: 84; Jobst, 2010). Associated with this are paradoxes, unsolvable basic problems (Schütze, 2000: 89) or 'constitutive antinomies' (Helsper, 2002: 84). The antinomies are expressed at various levels of society. Contradictory demands for action can be rooted in the education system and educational ideology of a particular society, such as the pedagogical requirement to treat everyone equally (universalism) and at the same time to recognise the individual person and their needs in each case (particularism). Such socially anchored contradictions manifest themselves as dilemmas on the immediate level of action and interaction, and characterise the specific pedagogical culture there, e.g. on the one hand, teachers have to be paternalistic, while on the other hand, have to maintain the goal of promoting children's participation (Jobst et al., 2022: 14).

By focusing on challenges faced in pioneering practices to address educational inequalities in Europe, we aim to contribute to a cross-national understanding of potential barriers to the implementation of egalitarian educational practices. Identifying potential barriers and challenges will help practitioners and stakeholders to better implement, develop and manage PPs across Europe. By being conscious of common challenges and dilemmas, pioneering practitioners, including development education professionals, may be one step ahead of potential hazards and strengthen their efforts in increasing access to and completion of education.

### **Methodological frames**

The Horizon 2020-project PIONEERED investigated twenty educational practices across nine European countries: Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain and Switzerland, including thirteen research institutions. This variety of national traditions, political currents and socioeconomic standings makes the task of comparing and triangulating results a multi-faceted and complex task. For analysing such rich material we utilised inductive semantic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for identifying the

levels of patterned responses within a qualitative dataset. By applying this analysis, results were drawn from an inquiry regarding a predetermined theme of challenges and dilemmas within the PPs, rather than attempting to identify an underlying theme more latent between the lines and more open to interpretation. In this sense results were primarily data driven – hence inductive – and not made to fit into a pre-existing coding framework (Ibid.: 83). Our analysis followed the six phases of analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clark (Ibid.: 87) for searching, reviewing and defining/naming types of challenges.

In this context we assumed that the same types of challenges materialise in a range of national contexts despite various forms of governance and educational values indicating a ubiquity of the challenges uncovered in the analysis.

Partners in the research team employed three distinct methods of data collection for each of the twenty PPs, summarised in Table 1:

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Table 1: strategies of data collection used for the twenty practices in the PIONEERED project

Amount	Method	Informants	Length (min)	Analytical focus
1-4	Individual interviews	1	90-150	Expert knowledge
1	Guided tour	1-3	30-60	Situated/Practical knowledge
1	Focus group interview	5-8	90-150	Collective/habituated knowledge

The individual interviews were semi-structured in shape and problem-centred in nature, exploring the histories, resources, development, implementation and organisation of each respective PP through the perspectives of experts – representatives with specific knowledge acquired through extensive work, with pioneering practice(s). The interview questions were informed by a Topic Guide employed by all partner countries for increased reliability controlling for different contexts. The guided tour was an ethnographical display of the physical location of each practice, with tactile, auditive and visual impressions from the daily operations of each PP, documented by dictaphone and camera. The focus group interviews included networks of stakeholders working in conjunction with each practice, but not necessarily on-site or as closely as experts. The questions for the focus group were based on preliminary findings from the individual interviews/guided tour as well as previous stakeholder interviews conducted in the early mapping phase of the PIONEERED project. The researchers were specifically instructed to dedicate part of the interview to exploring potential challenges and dilemmas faced in each practice.

All informants were given an information sheet in advance of the interview procedures, summarising the project and clarifying the participants’

rights. Participation was voluntary, and all data were cleared of any personally identifiable characteristics. The data material was stored on local servers secured with multi-step verification, appertaining to the respective research institutions. The project has received approval from all respective national data management agencies in all partner countries.

All interviews were transcribed back-to-back by researchers in the respective PIONEERED partner countries. All researchers who participated in data collection were well versed in the language and familiar with the educational policies, economic constraints and social patterns within their respective communities. The collective data were used to devise a set of five-page 'sketches'. These sketches (N=20) were uploaded into NVivo (QSR International 1.5.1) where we conducted our data analysis.

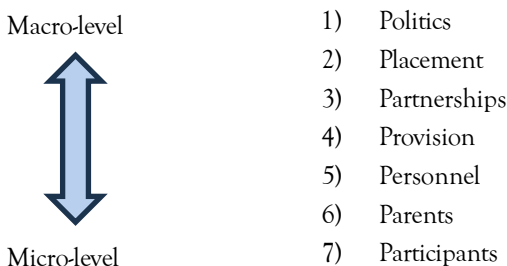
## **Results**

As one could expect, different terminologies were employed in the sketches (problems, struggles, rifts, frictions etc.) for addressing challenges in tackling and mitigating educational inequality through pioneering practices. Henceforth, they were all labelled as 'challenges'. A total of 166 quotations were used as the basis for the thematic analysis. The list of challenges was read several times and different categorisations were tried and discussed in the research team. We decided on an ordering grounded in a multi-level (micro/meso/macro) analytical frame ordered on a spectrum from conditional macro-level factors, down to individual micro-level factors. In the end, this resulted in seven categories considered the most comprehensive, non-overlapping option (see Figure 1). The categories are based on the formulations of the different practitioners and stakeholders from the PPs.

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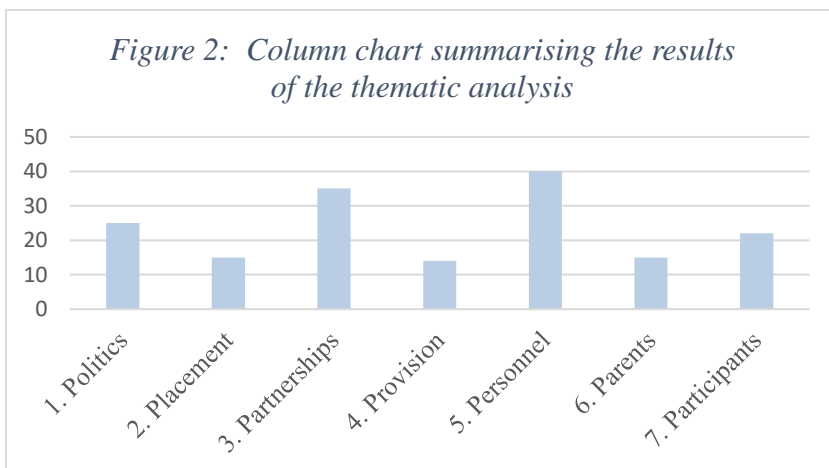


Figure 1: The seven Ps – Categories of challenges faced in pioneering practices



The PP representatives were mixed in their coverage of different challenges, ranging from zero to thirty-two concrete descriptions of different challenges. Results are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Column chart summarizing the results of the thematic analysis



Each category is considered in closer detail below.

**Politics** entails the interference of current active policies, legislation or informal processes that hinder the practice in their day-to-day operations. This

may take on many forms, such as scepticism from policy- and/or decision -makers in implementing policies for pioneering practices. Some practices may have been supposed to be implemented to support pioneering practices, but bureaucratic hurdles or unclear roles in implementation lead to practice trailing behind policy. Another example is how different policies may materialise differently at the meso-level, e.g. in that although legislated at the state-level, a certain policy may enact differently in different municipalities/counties/regions.

**Placement** refers to the challenges that arise from the practices' concrete spatial, natural and cultural facilities available to the beneficiaries and leaders of the pioneering practice. Within our data, there are challenges presented such as cases situated in urban landscapes not having adequate access to playgrounds, forested or green areas. On the other hand, some practices are situated in rural areas, which means less accessibility to learning facilities and social spaces often collaborating with PPs, such as museums, theatres, gymnasiums and swimming pools. Furthermore, it may relate to cultural or societal factors such as negative attitudes towards certain groups of people pertaining to ethnicity, cultural background, religion etc. being highly centred in a particular area. In line with this, placement also entails a demographic element, in the sense that the target group for a certain pioneering practice may at times be oversaturated in relation to the amount of people in need of the practice. In this sense, challenges relating to placement can also be deemed temporally bound.

**Partnerships** between pioneering practitioners and their collaborators present various kinds of challenges. Some problems arise from a lack of internal cooperation and/or understanding. Some of our cases can be considered partly or highly integrated with the traditional educational system in which the practice operates. In some of these cases, practitioners report reluctance or scepticism towards progressive elements, methods or content within the pioneering practice, stemming from the teachers and leaders within the traditional educational system. Some also report a lack of cooperation and partnerships within the practice itself between instructors, teachers or social workers. Other practices highlight a lack of external partners to cooperate with (which in part can be seen in relation to their placement, as explicated above), such as local businesses, NGOs or research

institutes. Some also report an unwanted level of dependency on, or involvement from, different partners, due to reliance on political influence and funding.

**Provision** refers to difficulties in securing financial sustainability, which materialises in multiple ways. Some report challenges pertaining to the long-term operation of the pioneering practices such as consumer goods (e.g. curriculum supplies, food, clothes, gasoline, wages). Some highlight larger one-time expenses such as large-scale purchases (equipment) or upgrades and renovations to physical facilities.

**Personnel** is the most prevalent code, observed in sixteen of the twenty case sketches, with forty separate interview sections addressing this issue. This includes unwanted shortages, changes or turnovers in staff, which can cause problems for ongoing continuity and relationship building with participants. Another problem related to personnel is the type of competence needed in working with participants that are already in a disadvantaged position. In combination with the dependence on specialised personnel, the need for an adequate number of personnel (with the necessary competence) is also highlighted. One case especially underpins that when working within a pioneering practice, practitioners need more than the bare minimum of working capacity – they need a surplus. This implies that not only must a pioneering practice have a sufficient number of competent teachers/instructors to operate, but it must also have additional staff, to allow for the practitioners to thrive and to counteract burnout and an overburdened staff.

**Parents** are described by some as a challenge in the sense that the pioneering practices find a fruitful relationship with the parents, guardians or other caretakers of the participants/pupils, as a key aspect in counteracting educational inequalities, yet some practices struggle with communicating or collaborating with parents. This may be due to linguistic barriers, lack of engagement, fear of stigmatisation, or differences in norms and customs.

**Participants** are children, pupils, students or adults attending the pioneering practices. In our data material, they range from pre-school age, until the age of twenty-nine. Many of the hindering factors pertaining to participants

are the same as those pertaining to the parents. They include getting into contact with the appropriate target-group, conveying the intentions of the pioneering practice, and achieving uptake into the practice. Again, these factors may be because of linguistic, cultural or social barriers such as fear of stigmatisation. Once reached, there is also the issue of keeping the participants sufficiently engaged within the practices. One paradox identified in multiple cases is that the participants which stand the most to gain from attending the practice, are often the ones most likely to either not attend, or prematurely drop out.

It is important to emphasise that these last two categories should not be interpreted to mean that parents and participants are the challenges per se. Rather, it is about interpersonal factors such as difficulties in communication and sustaining two-way engagement. The problems do not lie in the target group concerned, but often in the socially anchored asymmetrical power dynamics that characterise this interaction (Freire, 2000).

## **Discussion**

The identified challenges related to Politics, Placement, Partnerships, Provision, Personnel, Parents and Participants can be traced back, among other things, to the fact that worldwide neoliberal trends are influencing educational policy and practice in Europe. This is evident not only within the formal education system, but also in alternative educational practices that are considered egalitarian and pioneering.

The education sector is thus increasingly becoming an instrument of domination, which goes hand in hand with a shift to the right in large parts of the world (Giroux, 2022) – including Europe, as shown by the 2024 EU election. This raises the question whether emancipatory education, referred to as global education, development education, or intercultural education, can contribute to minimising educational inequality. In a sense, our study confirms that PPs, and by extension, the DE sector, has major challenges in not being able to tackle the ‘root causes’ of the socio-economic issues presented by the neoliberal paradigm (Fricke, 2022). However, we also see ways out of this dilemma. Based on the above considerations, we draw the following conclusions with regard to the

potential of DE to realise its fundamental aim of combating inequality, oppression and injustice in society.

Firstly, development education practice is itself trapped in structural constraints that it strives to overcome. The multilevel perspective proposed by the seven Ps elucidates the manner in which macro-level factors, such as ideological and political, may affect educational practices down to the micro level, and conversely, how small, independent practices working from the bottom-up can influence entire educational landscapes despite the competitive currents that threaten the prospects for equitable education. The entanglement of pioneering practices in social power structures is also expressed in the paradox that those participants in most need of the PPs are least likely to attend and finish the alternative provision. Our analysis shows that access to pioneering practices requires stronger systematic and directed support for those who do not have a voice. The culture of silence that Freire (2000) denounced in relation to banking concepts in the education system, and which prevents emancipatory practice, also appears to have a central role in the alternative practices analysed in this article.

Secondly, the exploration and further problematisation of educational challenges from the perspective of the practitioners themselves enable the formation of a cross-system perspective, which is of crucial importance for a 'transformative consciousness' (Jobst and Skrobaneck, 2024). This again calls to mind the Freirean concept of *conscientização*, showing how critical awareness and personal empowerment can, and should occur at the very practice level, in order to understand and reduce the presence of educational inequalities. In times of increasing social tensions and inequalities, it can be assumed that contradictions in educational practice, and thus in the experiences of practitioners, are also on the rise. Despite the concerns raised by Fricke (2022), we find that through pioneering educational practice, practitioners, participants, and parents are given the opportunity to become aware of the existence of such contradictions, i.e. unearthing the structural roots of inequality and oppression. The contradictions experienced make people aware of 'the connection between everyday educational practices and institutional, political and economic conditions', questioning their immutability (Jobst and Skrobaneck 2024: 380).

The seven problems identified in this study relate not only to the ‘usual suspects’ that hinder any positive emancipatory practice, such as limited time, insufficient access to suitable staff and their culmination in the interests of right-wing contemporary politics (Waddington, 2009; Giroux, 2022; Henderson and O’Neill, 2011). They also refer to contradictions in a society, which are to be understood as liquid, i.e. contradictory in the sense that ‘reproduction of order’ and rigidity is enforced by neoliberal economic structures (Jobst and Skrobanek, 2024). There are several examples of such contradictions impeding the emancipatory power of development education. Gaynor (2010) argued that while the number of, and diversity among students in higher education is growing, the prioritisation of development education in the same sector is going down. Kaimacuata (2010: 63) further highlighted the necessity of engaging teachers with activities and approaches employed in development education, and the ‘low priority given to global education within the education system’. As such, we should remember that the actions of individuals and their surrounding structures, are ‘relational, temporal, contingent and open – likewise, Freire always argued and practised with his educational approach’ (Jobst and Skrobanek, 2024: 376).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have identified seven typologies of challenges, which are prominent for practitioners and stakeholders from widely different contexts, with a common aim of reducing educational inequalities. As both a strength and a weakness; our interviews were conducted in the native language within each partner country, by researchers with intimate knowledge of the educational system and educational inequality within the local context. This led to several layers of interpretation between the PPs and this final article. Another limitation is the non-inclusion of the beneficiary perspective (participants within the PPs). Future studies should seek to document the direct experiences made by the beneficiaries of development education, in order to map the effectiveness of such initiatives, and more importantly amplify the voices of those negatively encumbered by ‘the lottery of birth’.

Still, these results should be considered useful to proponents of development education to guide pioneering practices across the global community in working toward social justice in educational settings. With sufficient planning,

funding, collaboration and adaption, many of these challenges may be manageable or even preventable. The first step to tackling such challenges are to identify them, and better yet, to be able to identify them before they arise. That is precisely what we hope this framework might be used for – as a tool for politicians, NGOs and education professionals trying to create equitable and socially responsible educational opportunities.

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