

# An unfair start: Inequality in children's education in rich countries <sup>[1]</sup>

Innocenti Report Card 15

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## AVAILABILITY

PDF available online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Introduction

In the world's richest countries, some children do worse at school than others because of circumstances beyond their control, such as where they were born, the language they speak or their parents' occupations. These children enter the education system at a disadvantage and can drop further behind if educational policies and practices reinforce rather than reduce the gap between them and their peers. These types of inequality are unjust. Not all children have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential, to pursue their interests and to develop their talents and skills. This has social and economic costs. This Report Card focuses on 41 high- and middle-income countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and/or the European Union (EU). Our primary concern is inequality in achievement among children as they near the end of compulsory schooling. This is the key measure in the league table. Inequalities that exist at this stage influence and limit children's prospects as adults. They indicate how well an education system has done in providing equal opportunities for all.

There are various ways to measure educational inequalities. In this report, we use the best and most up-to-date data to look at differences between individual children and between schools. We start with disparities in access to early education. For school-aged children we look at variations in their scores in standardized reading tests in primary and secondary school and their expectations of continuing into higher education. This provides a life-course perspective on our discussion of educational inequalities.

### Our research addresses three sets of questions:

1. How much educational inequality is there in rich countries? Does it vary between countries?
2. To what extent do children's starting points, circumstances and characteristics explain educational inequalities? How does this vary between countries and across the different stages of education?
3. To what extent do education systems and schools magnify or reduce inequalities between children? What policies and practices can help to reduce inequalities?

We begin tackling these questions in section 2, which presents a league table of inequalities across different stages of education from preschool to the age of 15. In some systems, compulsory education ends at this age. We focus on the period of compulsory education because we want to understand educational inequalities when most children are still at school. We also have the most complete data for this stage in children's lives. In sections 3, 4 and 5, we paint a more detailed picture of the possible sources of educational inequalities and how these develop as children progress through school. Section 6 takes a brief look at education systems and policies. In section 7, we discuss the implications of our analysis and provide our recommendations.

We find substantial variation in access to early education for the youngest children; in children's educational progress; and in their expectations of continuing in education beyond the end of compulsory schooling. Inequalities linked to family economic circumstances start early and persist. A child's gender or place of birth can also be a source of inequality. We identify the size of inequalities between schools within each country and highlight the potential role that educational policies and practices can play in either reducing or reinforcing inequalities. The international comparisons show that the magnitude of all these types of inequality varies substantially between countries. This offers the potential to learn from different educational policies and practices.

**Region:** International <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** international organizations <sup>[4]</sup>

accessibility <sup>[5]</sup>

equality <sup>[6]</sup>

## Links

- [1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/18/11/unfair-start-inequality-children%E2%80%99s-education-rich-countries>
- [2] [https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF-An-unfair-start-inequality-children-education\\_En.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF-An-unfair-start-inequality-children-education_En.pdf)
- [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international>
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