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Latest research trends on the social dimension of education and training

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Important themes and issues on the social dimension of education and training

This document presents the most prominent topics in education research globally (with higher representation of Europe and US) in the last half a year (December 2022 – June 2023) and provides a summary of important themes and issues to inspire future European Commission work in the social dimension of education and training. This summary highlights specific focus areas that are covered by recently published research articles and may be relevant to the European Commission’s programme 2023¹ and the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport, And Culture (DG EAC) Strategic Plan² 2020-2024, and European Education Area³ focus topics. The reviewed scientific journals are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Reviewed scientific journals and other publication outlets

Publication outlet	Issues in the period	Publication count
Review of Educational Research	8	13
Educational Research Review	2	17
Journal of Education Policy	8	14
Education and Training	10	17
Review of Research in Education	1	11
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	4	11
European Journal of Education	6	7
OECD Education Spotlights	n/a	1
PISA in Focus	n/a	3
Teaching in focus	n/a	3
Publications Office of the European Union	n/a	1
World Bank Group	n/a	2
Total	39	100

From the analysis of the most prominent journals focusing on the social dimension of education and some key recent studies, **seven broad themes relevant to the priorities of the European Commission and the broader context of the social dimension of education and training** could be observed. These topics include:

- Digitalisation of education
- Support for marginalised students and multiculturalism
- Equity, social justice, and inclusion
- Creativity
- Climate change
- Support for students with SEN
- Whole-school approach to well-being

¹ European Commission Work Programme 2023 Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy-documents/commission-work-programme/commission-work-programme-2023_en.

² Strategic Plan 2020-2024 Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport, And Culture Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/eac_sp_2020_2024_en.pdf

³ More info at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/>

This report is structured according to these topics. The selected scientific articles and key publications are then discussed to give a broader understanding of each topic.

1.1. Digitalisation of education

Technology has become increasingly important in education in recent years, revolutionizing the teaching and learning processes. The rapid advancement of technology and the widespread availability of digital tools have paved the way for a transformative shift in the education landscape, especially after Covid-19, when most schools and universities switched to online learning (Alzaidi, Shehawy 2022, Munoz-Najar et al 2022).

This section delves into recent trends of research on digitalisation in education, focusing both on opportunities and challenges. Digitalisation in education is one of the most popular topics in education research, covered by most of the observed journals. It investigates the benefits of increased access to digital resources, personalized learning experiences, and enhanced student engagement. Additionally, it examines the effectiveness of online and mobile learning, virtual agents and robots, game-based learning, and data-driven analytics. Challenges, strategies and policies to maximize the benefits while minimizing drawbacks are explored. The role of artificial intelligence in education is also considered.

Research on digitalisation in education explores its potential benefits, such as increased access to educational resources, flexibility in learning, and enhanced engagement and motivation among students (Alzaidi, Shehawy 2022, Munoz-Najar et al 2022). Research investigates how digital tools and platforms enable personalized learning experiences and adaptive learning pathways (Verhoeven et al 2022). It was found that computer-supported word reading interventions have a positive effect on the accuracy and speed of word reading regardless of the language used. In addition to the research of adaptive technology-driven learning strategies, scholars also examine the role of digital technologies in promoting collaboration, communication (Romero-Rodríguez et al 2023), critical thinking and self-reflection skills among students (Heymann et al 2022).

Other articles focus on the effectiveness of online and mobile learning (Noetel et al 2022, AlGhamdi 2022, Abdelwahed 2023), usage of virtual agents⁴, social robots⁵ (Lee, Lee 2022) computational thinking in different educational periods (Zeng 2023), game-based learning (Camuñas-García 2023) and virtual reality (Coban 2022, Villena-Taranilla 2022). It examines the impact of digital technologies on academic achievement, motivation (Verhoeven et al 2022, Wang et al 2023, Mauri Medrano et al 2023) and the impact on cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes (Martin et al 2022). For example, researchers found that including an effective pedagogical agent⁶ in multimedia lessons increased learners' positive emotions, improved motivation and facilitated learning performance (Wang et al 2023). A positive impact of mobile learning on learning outcomes, compared with face-to-face learning was also found (Martin et al 2022). Additionally, studies in this field explore the potential of data-driven analytics and learning management systems in monitoring student progress, providing personalized feedback, and supporting educational decision-making (Perry et al 2022). Finally, the role of artificial intelligence in education governance is also explored (Gulson, Witzemberger 2022, Selwyn 2022, Tuomi 2022).

A study about computational thinking skills showed that there were significant developments in the integration of these skills into the compulsory education system in

⁴ Artificial intelligence program designed to interact with humans through digital platforms.

⁵ Social robots, designed to imitate human interactions, communicate through common social behaviors and interact with people in physical space.

⁶ Virtual agent or digital character specifically designed to enhance the learning experience by incorporating emotional and social aspects into the educational setting.

Europe since 2010 (Bocconi et al 2022). However, research on the European digital infrastructure in schools revealed that it still needs improving, especially at the level of teachers who need more training to include digital tools in their practices. It also revealed that school leaders, teachers and students have different viewpoints about embedding digital technologies into learning processes (Kampylis & Sala 2023). Namely, teachers generally hold a negative view of the usefulness of digital technology for teaching and learning, while school leaders focus on obstacles related to infrastructure and teachers' lack of digital competences. Students, on the other hand, call for increased quality and quantity of technology use, emphasising the need to master digital technology for future job demands.

Research in this area also focuses on the challenges and considerations of digitalisation in education. Despite recognising the positive impact of technologies in learning processes, scientists also examine possible issues such as posthumanism in education⁷ (Rousell et al 2022), scarcity of studies when using mobile learning in teaching productive skills (Irons, Bensen Bostancı 2023), and social isolation (Alzaidi, Shehawy 2022). To improve the productive skills of students in mobile-based instruction the use of CAPE lesson framework⁸ is recommended. Research in this field also aims to identify governing strategies and policies (Siljebo 2022) to address these challenges and maximize the benefits of digitalisation while minimizing potential drawbacks. For example, one study found that the digital skills of teachers are considered one of the quality standards, however, these teacher skills vary from school to school, which results in an unequal distribution of skilled teachers among schools and in turn reproduces inequality in learning quality. To avoid it, specialized training for identified unskilled teachers is suggested as well as standardized requirements for minimal digital skills (OECD 2022a). Other research found that digitalisation leads to decreased use of paper books at home and school which becomes a problem for socially disadvantaged groups since these groups in general possess less books at home and with digitalisation the number tends to decrease even more. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 showed that students that have a higher number of paper books at home show higher performance in reading and enjoyment of reading. Therefore, while now it is a persistent difference for the socially disadvantaged groups, scholars warn that it might result in serious educational inequality causing continuous lower reading performance for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ikeda & Rech 2022).

1.2. Support for marginalised students and multiculturalism

Recent research on the social dimension of education and training pays additional attention to multiculturalism and potentially vulnerable groups of students (ethnic minorities, migrants, students of various religions) and aims to explore access to quality education, academic achievement, social integration, cultural identity formation, and the promotion of inclusivity and equity. The topic was broadly explored by the majority of journals thus suggesting remaining importance and scholarly attention.

In this section, we summarise the newest research exploring the barriers faced by marginalised groups, including language barriers, segregation, discrimination, and limited representation, while evaluating the impact of existing policies on multiculturalism. The section also emphasizes the importance of multicultural education, inclusive teaching

⁷ Posthumanism is an alternative paradigm that challenges the humanist perspective of humans as the central focus by critiquing the belief in human exceptionalism, which has historically led to exclusionary and oppressive practices. It emphasizes the need to move beyond hierarchical and privileged notions of human superiority and dominance, considering diverse forms of life and experiences as interconnected.

⁸ Context-Analysis-Practice-Evaluation (CAPE) is a teaching framework that emphasizes the importance of contextualizing topics, promoting conscious analysis of the context by both teachers and students, and incorporating task-based activities to facilitate learning.

practices, and the role of educators in creating culturally responsive learning environments, highlighting the significance of professional development for addressing diversity effectively.

Recent studies in this field shed light on the disparities and inequalities that exist in educational systems, particularly regarding access to resources and opportunities for marginalised groups. Such research investigates the barriers faced by racial and ethnic minority students, migrants, and refugees (Aleghfeli, Hunt 2022). The main barriers discussed in the studies are language barriers (Bunar, Juvonen 2022, Bratlie et al 2022, Pico, Woods 2023, Smythe 2023), segregation (Friedrichs 2022) discrimination, stereotyping, cultural bias (Apugo et al 2022), and limited representation of diverse perspectives in curricula and teaching materials (Mehta, Henriksen 2022, Mims et al 2022, Souto-Manning et al 2022, Grant 2023). Several studies approach the negative impact of existing national and local policies and political directions on multiculturalism on educational policies and practices and explore possible strategies for a change (Nikolaidis 2022, Bamberger et al 2023, Wright, Kim 2022, Margolis et al 2023). For example, US researchers found that the language discourse used in the policy documents on school discipline, influenced by white supremacist logics, has detrimental effects on black students. They argue that these discourses impede progress towards equity and justice in education (Nikolaidis 2022).

Research on multiculturalism in education emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse cultures, languages, and identities within educational environments. For example, in one study researchers sought to assess students' intercultural competence (IC) using qualitative methods. They discovered that relying solely on writing-based methods, such as reflective writing, may not capture the complexity of IC development and could be a disadvantage for students with weaker writing skills. To address this, the researchers propose the inclusion of diverse assessment approaches like role-plays, portfolios, and intercultural communication tasks. Additionally, they highlight the need to critically analyse the standards used in IC assessment to avoid perpetuating biases and limited understandings of IC, such as prioritizing certain cultures or factual knowledge over deeper cultural understanding. By broadening the disciplinary context and geographical distribution of IC assessment, the study aims to promote a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to multicultural education (Luo, Chan 2022).

Studies also explore the role of educators, school policies and curriculum (Shahjahan et al 2022) in creating inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments (Bratlie et al 2022). They highlight the significance of culturally sensitive teaching practices, inclusive pedagogies, and the integration of diverse perspectives and histories into curricula (Patton et al 2022, Hines, Fallace 2022, Gottfried et al 2022, Oliver 2023). Such research also investigates professional development and training on race and racism for teachers and its impact. Racial-equity-orientated teachers are associated with positive outcomes, while race-focused professional development has a positive impact on students (Hagenaars et al 2023). Another study found that the effectiveness of implementing multiculturalism and colour-blindness approach in the class depends mostly on individual-level (personal beliefs and attitudes) and micro-level (building student-teacher relationships, class management, avoiding and solving conflict and engaging students to participate) factors (Matschiner 2022).

1.3. Equity, social justice, and inclusion

Research on equity, social justice, and inclusion investigates the disparities, inequalities, and barriers that exist within educational systems. It aims to investigate practices of promoting fairness, equal opportunities, and inclusivity for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or social circumstances, and the impact of these social practices on students' results and wellbeing. The topic was explored in many journals, placing itself as an important social area of discussion.

Recent studies in this field explore various aspects related to equity, social justice, and inclusion in education. They investigate the impact of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, language, and other factors on educational outcomes and experiences. Several articles emphasize the impact of inequalities on students' achievements and further career prospects (Hägg et al 2022, Crimmins, Casey 2023). Researchers found that student gender balance in the classroom has a significant positive impact on graduates' likelihood of engaging in start-up activities post-graduation. The study points out that improved gender balance is beneficial not only to the underrepresented gender but the overall student group (Hägg et al 2022). Other researchers are going even further and suggest gender quotas in universities since their study revealed that universities fail to provide sufficient role models for women students to stimulate their further motivation and aspirations (Crimmins, Casey 2023). Other papers aim to identify and understand the systemic factors (i.e., sorting students into different tracks, unequal distribution of experienced teachers, selective admission policies or national-level factors, such as neoliberal VET policy) that contribute to educational inequities (Terrin, Triventi 2023, Tütlys et al 2022, Honey, Carrasco 2023, OECD 2023b, Ikeda 2022, Kaščák & Strouhal 2023) and reproduction of marginalisation (i.e., bullying) (Dawes et al 2023) and to propose strategies to address them. For example, one study provides theoretical and methodological recommendations for researchers studying marginalisation in mathematics education (Chen, Horn 2022), while another suggests including unemployed people in continuing vocational education and training (CVET) courses to stimulate their motivation for employment (Mara et al 2022).

Moreover, recent research on equity, social justice, and inclusion in education predominantly examines the important role of schools, educators, and curricula in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. It investigates the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices, inclusive and creative pedagogies, and curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and experiences. The authors also emphasize the importance of addressing student debt and the need for imaginative approaches to public funding of art and artists since arts are still perceived as an unfavourable profession by non-humanitarian students and half the adult American population. The lack of importance and scepticism regarding art studies and artists in society results in limited funding options for those who want to engage in art studies and develop their artistic careers, especially when focusing on less popularly acknowledged topics such as minority and novel experimental art (Whitaker, Wolniak 2022). Researchers stress that teachers are the interpreters of diversity and they should not deny the unpredictability and uncertainty that diversity brings, however, they rather should employ it creatively and make it a source of pedagogical innovation (Kohout-Diaz 2023). Research also emphasizes the importance of promoting positive school climates, respectful and inclusive interactions among students, and collaborative environments (Wallis et al 2022) that enable self-improvement (Ruiz-Eugenio et al 2023) and fosters equity and social justice (Vetter et al 2022).

The World Bank Group (WBG) has identified nine effective approaches and interventions aimed at assisting boys affected by risky behaviours to recover and re-establish a safe and productive path to adulthood. These strategies include implementing education equivalency programs (also known as second chance education) for over-age young

individuals seeking to complete their formal education, providing job training programs that encompass technical and life skills training along with internships, offering financial incentives to promote positive decision-making, organizing youth activities in youth-friendly spaces like after-school programs, establishing youth service programs or public sector internships, implementing mentorship programs with caring adults, delivering targeted employment services to at-risk youth, incorporating life skills training into all interventions targeted at such youth, and providing self-employment and entrepreneur programs (World Bank Group 2023).

Recent research also examines policy implications and advocates for systemic changes to promote equity and inclusivity. It investigates the impact of policies related to different types of education approaches (i.e., skill ecosystem) (Doyle, Wang 2023) and educational access on marginalised students (Dalane, Marcotte 2023, Honey, Carrasco 2023). This research contributes to the development of evidence-based policies, strategies and practices that prioritize equity, social justice, and inclusion (Freidus, Turner 2022), for example, researchers suggest that better aligning student teacher placements with first-year teacher hiring could improve early-career teacher effectiveness (Krieg et al 2022). The other study found that the implementation of an interdistrict integration program (in Boston, USA) for racial and ethnic minorities results in higher school graduation and college matriculation, thus author suggests expanding this programme to other metropolitan areas to address racial and ethnic gaps in educational attainment (Mantil 2022).

1.4. Creativity

Research on creativity in education explores the importance, benefits, and strategies for fostering creativity within educational settings. It examines how creativity can be nurtured and integrated into teaching and learning practices to enhance student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and overall academic achievement (Karwowski et al 2022, Burnard et al 2022, Long et al 2022, OECD 2022b). The topic of creativity was mostly discussed in the journal "Review of Research in Education", where an entire issue was designated to the research of creativity in education.

Studies investigate the role of educators in creating an environment that supports and encourages creativity. They explore instructional approaches, teaching methods, and classroom activities that promote creative thinking and expression (Karwowski et al 2022). Researchers stress the role of teachers while enhancing students' creative potential and creative imagery through i.e., creative training. They suggest focusing on nurturing students' creative selves to make creative pursuits more desirable while also boosting their creativity-related self-regulatory skills (Karwowski et al 2022). Other research found that different engagement in creativity and critical thinking strategies must be applied to boys and girls, namely, boys need strategies to help them with their boredom, while girls need strategies that would boost their confidence (OECD 2022b).

Research on creativity in education explores the relationship between creativity and other educational domains, such as STEM fields, humanities, and arts (Burnard et al 2022). It investigates how creativity can enhance learning and innovation across disciplines and how different subjects can be integrated to foster interdisciplinary creativity.

Studies in this field examine the impact of educational policies and curriculum design on nurturing creativity. They explore the role of assessment methods, standardized testing, and educational structures in either hindering or supporting creative thinking and expression (Long et al 2022). Researchers found that existing assessments of creativity are more general than specific and focus more on cognitive than noncognitive aspects and suggest to use of a method of authentic assessment that assesses student's actual performance and provides feedback for teachers and students (Long et al 2022).

1.5. Climate change

Research on climate change in education focuses on understanding the role of education in addressing the challenges and impacts of climate change. It examines how education can contribute to raising awareness, promoting sustainable behaviours, and fostering a sense of responsibility and action towards mitigating and adapting to climate change (OECD 2023a). Despite being a top issue in today's political agenda, climate change in education research is not yet that well developed, compared to other topics. However, since already several journals are covering this topic, the tendency of growing focus in educational research on climate change is observable.

Research in this field explores the role of schools and educational institutions in creating environmentally sustainable practices. It emphasises the role of minorities in environmental sustainability and the importance of integrating their approach (Román et al 2022). Research also examines the impact of environmental education initiatives, awareness campaigns, and sustainability programs on student attitudes and behaviours towards climate change (Greer et al 2023). It is stressed that school leaders play a crucial role in mobilising and allocating necessary resources that support active pedagogies and innovation, needed for education for sustainability. They also can support teachers by creating practices for professional development and collaboration (OECD 2023a). Moreover, the research suggests that environmental school initiatives, targeting whole school communities, not single individuals are more effective (OECD 2022c)

Research on climate change in education recognizes the importance of educational policies and governance in addressing climate change. It explores the role of different policy actors in fostering climate change education (Pitton, McKenzie 2022). It also emphasises the importance of empowering and fostering students' agency to create discussion groups and other means of activism (OECD 2023a).

1.6. Support for students with SEN

Recent research on well-being in education and support for students with SEN focuses on understanding the challenges, needs, and support mechanisms for individuals with diverse abilities and mental health conditions within educational settings. It examines the impact of disabilities, neurodiversity (including conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia), and psychological problems on learning, academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being. The topic is covered by several journals in education research; however, it is not as popular as other research areas discussed at the beginning of the review.

Recent studies in this field investigate the barriers (organisational, curricular, pedagogical, and socialisation with peers) and facilitators faced by students with disabilities, neurodivergent individuals, and those experiencing psychological challenges. Research explores the role of inclusive education practices (Moura, Fontes 2023) and the importance of supporting mechanisms, teacher, and parental support and how these strategies can be integrated into teaching practices to create comprehensive school responses (Nevill, Forsey 2023). It also examines teaching strategies (such as co-teaching) (Strogilos et al 2023), and specialized interventions on the academic and social outcomes of these individuals.

Research explores the role of educators (Tan et al 2022) in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. It examines the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of education professionals towards disabilities and mental health conditions (Tarantino et al 2022). Studies reveal that teachers are critical towards the inclusion strategies which they understand as additional care work for children with special needs. The effectiveness of inclusion is lacking when it is demanded by school leaders rather than naturally fostered. The study also adds that parents are sometimes excluded from the practices that are designed to help their children since teachers do not consider them as experts on their children (Štech & Smetáčková 2023).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of early intervention, assessment, and individualized support plans. It explores the effectiveness of interventions in addressing the specific needs of these individuals (Cipriano et al 2023), namely stating that existing elementary school universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions tend to exclude people with disabilities and therefore require more inclusive strategies. Research also examines the transition to formal schooling, investigating the support mechanisms needed (i.e., elevating structural obstacles, upskilling the staff, increasing social skills, and training school, family and community to provide support) to facilitate successful transitions (Then, Pohlmann-Rother 2023).

1.7. Whole-school approach to well-being

Recent research in education also focuses on understanding the dynamic interactions and collaborations between parents, teachers, students, and peers in order to create a supportive and conducive learning environment. It recognizes the importance of strong partnerships between these stakeholders in promoting student success, well-being, and academic achievement (Fiskerstrand 2022, Pyne 2023). However, it is noticed that this topic was not that largely explored by the scholars compared with other discussed areas. Despite that, the tendency of existing focus on the inclusion of all stakeholders in the education process is still present in recent scholarship.

Recent research on parent-student relationship examines the benefits of parental involvement in education. It explores how parental engagement and support at home can positively influence children's learning beliefs, motivation, emotions and behaviour, which in turn has a positive impact on student's learning outcomes and academic achievement, particularly mathematic outcomes (Fiskerstrand 2022).

Researchers also emphasise the role of existing peer support and other social capital that students can use to learn from their mistakes (Kwok, Kwong 2023). The study reveals that when students experience a high level of trust, mutual respect, and cooperation within their team, they are more willing to admit their mistakes and learn from them. This supportive team environment creates a safe space for students to acknowledge their errors and promotes a community of practice. The practical implications suggest that educators can cultivate environments that encourage collaborative learning, problem-based activities, and real-life projects to enhance students' ability to learn from mistakes and develop important soft employability skills. Additionally, the findings suggest that allowing students to self-select their groups can promote high levels of supportive team relationships, and efforts can be made to foster the traits associated with intellect, such as acceptance of diverse perspectives and adaptability (Kwok, Kwong 2023).

Recent studies also focus on importance of continuous teacher support and positive evaluation of student's behaviour and its impact on student's self-perception, motivation, and academic achievements. The researcher found that past school experience with educators may affect the future student's success in school (Pyne 2023).

Finally, the research also reflects critically on the existing practices in school settings regarding well-being. The research highlights tensions between individual and collective notions of well-being and emphasizes the potential conflicts that may arise when activities and interventions prioritize certain competencies and behaviors over others, potentially reinforcing inequalities. The study emphasizes the importance of considering social conditions and recognizing the impact of structural factors in addressing well-being, particularly for marginalised groups. The research underscores the need for critical and reflective approaches to policy development and implementation in order to effectively address social and emotional well-being in educational settings. (Brown, Donnelly 2022).

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