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Uncovering school-level influences on equal educational opportunities in secondary education: a systematic review of the interplay among key factors

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Schools play a fundamental role in fostering both academic and personal development, ensuring equal educational opportunities (EEO). Despite this ambition, education remains an institution that reproduces inequality, particularly at the secondary school level. Research on educational inequalities has mainly focused on individual pupil and/or teacher factors, neglecting the broader school environment. This systematic literature review (SLR) addresses this gap by identifying how school-level factors influence EEO. The literature review included 14 studies, of which eight were qualitative, three were quantitative and three were mixed methods studies. The review adhered to the PRISMA guidelines and a thematic analysis was performed. The findings reveal a notable gap in research addressing how various factors—such as teachers' attitudes, pupil grouping and school culture—interplay in ensuring EEO. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of school leadership in navigating and facilitating this interplay. This systematic review highlights the need for future research to adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach in order to gain deeper, qualitative insights into how these factors work together to foster equal educational opportunities.

KEYWORDS

secondary schools, equal educational opportunities, school environment, systematic review, school leadership

Introduction

Despite a firm international legislative basis that strives to provide equal educational opportunities (EEO) for all pupils, such as the UNESCO Salamanca declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF (1989), effective implementation in reality has failed to occur, with high numbers of pupils dropping out and unequal educational opportunities persisting (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; OECD, 2023).

Inequality is frequently explained by the characteristics of individuals, including pupils and teachers, such as age, gender, religion, origin, disability, etc. (Crul, 2016; Maly et al., 2014; Vertovec, 2007). Research shows that pupils' individual (background) characteristics significantly impact their academic performance, leading to educational inequalities. Research indicates that children from lower socio-economic background performed poorly in mathematics, reading and science tests and that pupils with a learning disability are less involved in courses to prepare them for higher education, compared with pupils without learning disabilities (Kangas and Cook, 2020; Shifrer et al., 2013). Additionally, pupils with a migration background receive lower grades and less favorable recommendations for their further educational career (Busse et al., 2023; Lüdemann and Schwerdt, 2013). With regard to gender, research indicates that boys tend to underperform and are at a higher risk of dropping out compared to girls (Legewie and DiPrete, 2012). Besides these possible explanations at the pupil level, explanations have also been sought at the level of (individual) teachers. Studies demonstrate that teachers' attitudes and expectations have a significant impact on pupil performance, with prejudiced attitudes and/or low expectations toward pupils from underserved groups also automatically entailing lower academic achievement (Costa et al., 2021; Van Den Bergh et al., 2010; Van Ewijk, 2011).

However, achieving greater equality in education and EEO for all pupils is not solely the task and responsibility of individual pupils and teachers. Focusing only on individual pupils and teachers leads to an overestimation of individuals' ability and responsibility and an underestimation of the collective responsibility, in achieving EEO. Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development (1980) posits that individual development is influenced not only by personal factors but also by environmental contexts (Anderson et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1980; El Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022). Bronfenbrenner (1980) argued that the study of human development also had to look beyond the observable individual, since individuals develop in interaction with their changing environment, which can be pictured using concentric circles. The individual—in this case the pupil—is placed inside of these circles. The first circle is described as the *micro-level* and concerns individuals in their immediate setting. In this case, the pupils and teachers in the daily classroom. Next, there is the *meso-level,* involving a collection of multiple micro-systems. This level includes the interactions between different individuals and levels; for example, the pupils within different pupil groups, outside the usual class group, and interactions between the pupil and other teachers from the school. Next, Bronfenbrenner describes the *exo-system*, which comprises the set of rules, policies and culture in the school. This level shapes the broader environment in ways that indirectly influence. Lastly, the *macro-level* encompasses the broad economic, political and cultural context, which shapes beliefs, rules, and regulations that in turn influence all the other levels. Within this framework, schools play a crucial role in promoting EEO and achieving greater equality (Byrd, 2020; Van Avermaet and Sierens, 2010).

Building on Bronfenbrenner's theory to theorize the specific role of school environments, Struyf et al. (2022) created the Seed-model, which is a visual representation of how possible factors within the school environment might enhance education for all pupils (see Figure 1). This model is based on Bronfenbrenner's theory and emphasizes the school's responsibility and agency in achieving EEO. By doing so, the Seed-model helps to identify various factors at school level that influence EEO. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's theory, the Seed-model emphasizes the importance of the interaction between an individual and its environment, as well as the importance of the school environment in the development of pupils and their EEO. In short: Bronfenbrenner's theory offers an ecological framework highlighting the importance of the environment, whereas the Seed-model focuses primarily on one of these environments (i.e., the school environment) to establish EEO for *all* pupils.

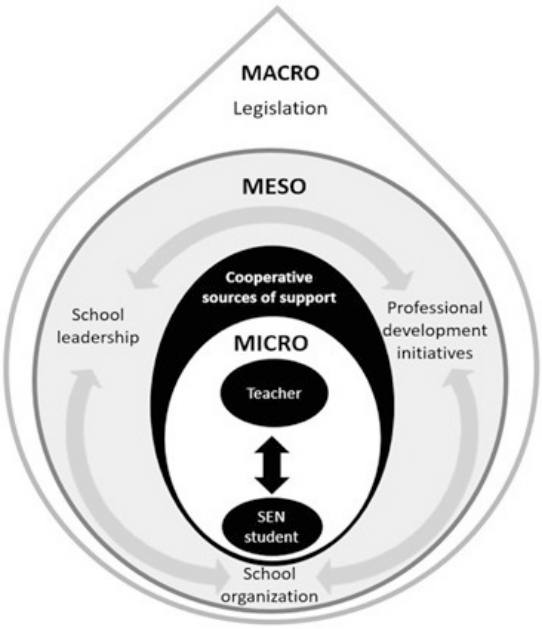

FIGURE 1
The Seed-model for investigating the implementation of inclusive education. (Taken from *Implementing inclusive education: What are the levers to support teachers?,* by Struyf et al., 2022, p. 70).

It becomes clear that schools have a responsibility to provide and promote equal educational opportunities for all students. They can do so by developing and implementing a policy with a clear focus on inclusion and equity, effective teaching, adequate resources, and offering a relevant curriculum (Katz and Acquah, 2021). However, in reality, schools contribute to educational inequalities in two ways (Santibañez and Fagioli, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2015).

On the one hand, schools function as the basis of society, striving to attain educational equality by addressing disparities and supporting disadvantaged pupils (Rea and Zinskie, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2015; Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Hamilton, 1984; Van De Weerd, 2024). For example, Santibañez and Fagioli (2016) found that the opportunity to learn (OTL) in schools positively affects mathematics achievement and can even reduce the detrimental influence of socioeconomic background on pupils' achievement. Furthermore, they also found that higher quality teachers and effective school management positively influence educational equalities (Santibañez and Fagioli, 2016). Fuchs and Woessmann (2004) also found that school policies and available

resources can enhance EEO for all pupils. Quality of instruction (Gustafsson et al., 2018), instruction time (Good et al., 2009) and school climate (Hoy et al., 2006; Kunter et al., 2013) have also been found to reduce the effect of low socio-economic background on school achievement and contribute to EEO.

On the other hand, schools are also seen as elements that maintain or even reinforce educational inequalities (Jeffers and Lillis, 2024; Schmidt et al., 2015; OECD, 2023), which can be explained by several mechanisms. An initial mechanism involves tracking, wherein pupils are divided into different educational tracks (for example, general schooling, technical schooling, vocational schooling). Research found that pupils with low socio-economic backgrounds and/or migration background have a greater tendency to be placed in these "lower" tracks than pupils with high socio-economic backgrounds (Timmermans et al., 2018). Additionally, this is accompanied by the phenomenon of "curriculum hierarchy," in which the more classic and general subjects and tracks are prioritized over others or are given more value than others (Tranter, 2012). Not only are pupils placed in different tracks, based on their socio-economic background, but resources and teachers are also allocated differently based on these tracks. For example, research showed that higher qualified and even more experienced teachers tend to be placed more often in higher tracks, compared with the lower tracks (Francis et al., 2019). On top of this, individual teacher biases and beliefs also play a role, with low SES pupils tending to be rated lower on a number of indicators, compared to high SES pupils (Doyle et al., 2023; Tranter, 2012). Finally, schools tend to adopt a meritocratic principle, where pupils' achievements are the result of their own efforts and merits. However, it is precisely this assumption that makes inequalities in pupils "starting positions "overlooked," so that existing inequalities are maintained and reinforced in pupils" later school careers (Batruch et al., 2019).

Current study

The theoretical frameworks discussed here clearly indicate that it is important to focus on school-level factors as well as individual factors, to counter the limited focus in previous research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify these factors at both levels (i.e., micro and meso-level), and how they interplay through a systematic literature review (SLR). Identifying and understanding these factors is essential in order to develop more effective strategies to provide EEO for all pupils. Without a detailed understanding of these factors and their interplay, there is a chance that our attempts to advance EEO might fail and even exacerbate already existing disparities. Examining these factors by means of a systematic literature review, with thorough analysis based on a pedagogical theory and clear result clustering, can help to implement evidence-informed improvements and create an educational environment that is truly inclusive and equitable.

This systematic literature review adopted the definition of "school environment" by Jain et al. (2015) as well as the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner (1980) and the Seed-model of Struyf et al. (2022). This includes teachers and school leaders, as well as the daily classroom practices, leadership styles, communication and collaboration within the school and the school policies on certain topics (e.g., language of instruction). Therefore, this systematic review focuses on answering the following research questions:

What are the factors in the school environment that promote EEO for pupils in secondary schools?

> RQ1: What are the micro-level factors of key actors (in the school environment) that promote EEO in secondary schools, as formulated in the Seed-model?

> RQ2: What are the meso-level factors (in the school environment) that promote EEO in secondary schools, as formulated in the Seed-model?

> RQ3: How do these micro and meso-level factors interplay with each other in the context of promoting EEO in secondary schools (cfr. exo level as formulated in the Bronfenbrenner model)?

The current study does not explicitly include the macro-level as level of analysis, despite its importance on EEO. Research shows that macro-level factors (such as funding or policy measures) can result in significant differences in educational quality and equal opportunities (Cruz et al., 2022; Kolbe et al., 2023). This study focused on the school level, thus addressing the micro and meso-levels.

The focus of this review is on identifying factors (within the broader school environment) that promote EEO for all pupils in secondary schools. Secondary education plays a fundamental role in pupils' lives, both in terms of preparing pupils for higher studies and/or preparing them to participate actively in society. At the same time, this educational period is one in which inequalities between pupils are particularly prominent (OECD, 2018, 2023; Perry and Southwell, 2014; Kearney et al., 2022; Pfeffer, 2008). Therefore, this SLR focuses on secondary education, the educational level of 12-18-year-old pupils.

Methods

While conducting this literature review, the authors of this study closely adhered to the PRISMA Checklist and the PRISMA Statement for Reporting Systematic Reviews (Liberati et al., 2009). A research protocol outlining the necessary steps to be taken and the accompanying inclusion and -exclusion criteria was drafted before the actual process began.

Search and screening process

Two electronic databases were selected for the literature search: Web of Science and ERIC, and the search focused on articles published over a period of 20 years (2003–2023). Keywords related to the research question were combined to obtain as many relevant articles as possible. The chosen search terms were intentionally kept broad, such as: "equity," "school environment," "secondary schools," and "factors," to avoid unwittingly limiting the results to specific

TABLE 1 Search terms per concept.

Concept	Terms
Equal educational opportunities	(Equal educational opportunities OR equity OR equal education OR equitable education OR equal access OR equal outcomes)
School environment	(School environment OR educational environment OR educational setting)
Secondary schools	(Secondary schools OR high schools OR middle schools OR junior high schools OR K-12)
Factors	(Factors OR variables OR elements OR aspects OR characteristics)

theoretical constructs and strands. The search terms were separated by the Boolean operator, AND (see Table 1).

In line with the focus on the school environment and its role in promoting EEO for all pupils, the search process was not based on specific pupil characteristics, such as SES or ethnic background, which are commonly associated with inequalities. In this way, the study sought to maintain a focus on inequality itself. This is in line with the definition of diversity (Crul, 2016; Maly et al., 2014; Vertovec, 2007) that served as the basis of this study as well as that of Nilholm (2021), who stated that a theory can only be as good it is not already starting from a limited perspective. By also including search terms such as "factors," "variables," and "characteristics," the search allowed for the exploration of factors within the broader school environment, instead of focusing on individual pupil traits. This ensured that the search encompassed all relevant articles aimed at promoting EEO for all pupils. This way, it allowed for the discovery of factors that might have been overlooked if certain pupil characteristics were excluded in advance. The complete list of search terms is included in Table 1.

The initial search yielded 76 results (73 after the removal of duplicates). Titles and abstracts of all articles were screened by two independent reviewers, using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they met the following inclusion criteria: (a) written in English; (b) peer-reviewed, (c) empirical, (d) published between 2003 and 2023 by pioneering authors; (e) explicitly focusing on secondary schools; (f) examining equality in education: equality should be the main focus of the studies; (g) studies that examine factors in the school environment that have an influence on educational equality. Randomized, controlled trials, case-control studies, cross-sectional, prospective, and retrospective studies were included in the analysis. The complete flow of articles found, screened, and selected can be found in Figure 2, the PRISMA flow chart.

Methodological quality

To assess the methodological quality of the studies, the Quality Assessment Tool for Studies with Diverse Designs (QATSDD) was used (Sirriyeh et al., 2012). Studies and their aspects were rated on a three-point Likert scale, with the total score reflecting the overall quality of the research. The first and second author reviewed the articles and, if there were conflicts, it was discussed with the entire research team (including the author team) until consensus was reached. During this process, a cut-off score of 65% was used (Fernández Fernández et al., 2023). As a result, 11 articles were retained. However, it was decided to include three additional articles, as a lower assessment of these papers was mainly due to the lack of specific information to assess some of the criteria of the QATSDD.

Data extraction

The first author of this study extracted data, including data on basic study characteristics (country, authors, publication date, study type, etc.) as well as outcomes according to the aforementioned inclusion and exclusion criteria. This extraction was then checked by the second author. Differences between the two reviewers were resolved by revisiting the original data or by consultation between the reviewers. When necessary, a third reviewer from the research team was consulted.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyze each article (Braun and Clarcke, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2006), which was then verified by the second author. In the first round, initial codes were created, using larger themes, according to the research question, such as "micro-level" and "meso-level." In the second round, these codes were further divided into sub-themes by the first author, such as "leadership," "attitudes," or "grouping." In the next round, relationships and connections between codes and sub-themes were analyzed and sub-themes and codes were placed at the corresponding level of influence, in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's theory (1980) and the Seed-model (Struyf et al., 2022).

Results

Characteristics of the articles reviewed

The research reviewed was carried out in seven countries spread over five continents. The largest number of articles originated from the United States ($n = 8$), followed by Europe (Austria, Sweden and England) (n-3), Asia (Pakistan) ($n = 1$), Africa (Tanzania) ($n = 1$) and Oceania (New-Zealand) ($n = 1$).

Out of the reviewed studies, three were exclusively quantitative studies using a survey design. Eight studies were qualitative, based on individual interviews and/or focus groups. Lastly, three studies were labeled as mixed-methods studies, combining both quantitative (survey-data or national statistics) and qualitative (individual and/or group interviews) data. Target populations varied, with a large emphasis on the schools teaching team, the role of school leaders or schools as a case, although three studies also explicitly included pupils' perspectives. Sample sizes varied widely, with quantitative studies mostly using national data based on very large samples of teacher respondents (e.g., $N = 960$) and qualitative studies using smaller groups of respondents within a school-case (e.g., $N = 6$). Supplementary Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the studies included in this review.

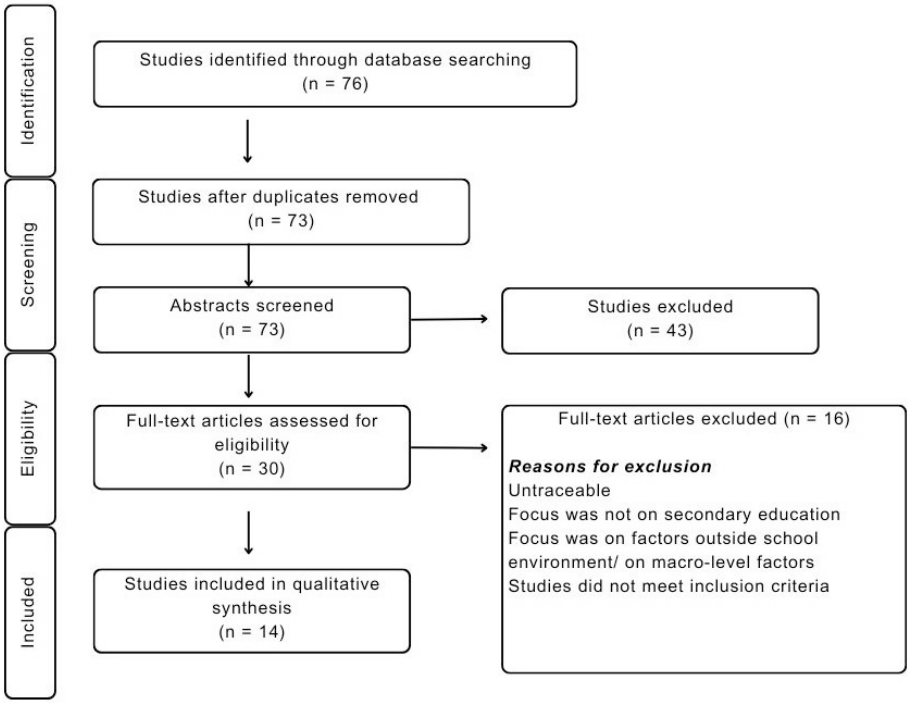

FIGURE 2
Flow-diagram of the process of this systematic review (based on Liberati et al., 2009).

In addition to the study characteristics, a triple thematic analysis was performed to answer the research questions and several factors affecting the capacity of schools to promote EEO emerged. These are discussed according to their level, in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's theory and the Seed-model (Struyf et al., 2022). First, factors at the micro-level (according to the Seed-model) are examined (RQ1), followed by factors at the meso-level (according to the Seed-model). Lastly, the interplay between these factors is discussed (i.e., the exo-level, as defined by Bronfenbrenner) (RQ3).

Factors at micro-level

The first analysis concerned the micro-level. As mentioned earlier, this micro-level was defined by analogy with Bronfenbrenner's model (1980) and the Seed-model of Struyf et al. (2022), in which the micro-level focused on the role of key-actors of the school team within the school environment rather than as isolated actors themselves. A later analysis considered how these key actors are influenced by and interact with diverse pupils. This way, the focus lies not solely on individual pupil characteristics, but on the complex dynamics whereby the school environment, as a whole, influences both teacher behavior and pupil performance, which forms the basis of creating EEO.

The first factor at the micro-level concerns the *attitudes and beliefs teachers have toward their pupils*. Having positive beliefs about pupils is of great importance, as this can positively impact the engagement of pupils in their learning process (Braun et al., 2016), as well as their learning outcomes (Erling et al., 2021). Pupils indicated that teachers who cultivated a strong belief in them, who encouraged them to bring themselves to their best possible performance, actually had an impact on their learning performance. However, Braun et al. (2016) mention an important prerequisite, namely the importance of setting clear goals for pupils. The study by Taylor et al. (2019) found that teachers' beliefs had a strong influence on the process of "labeling" pupils, based on pupil achievement. In fact, the attitudes and beliefs of teachers play a role in allocating pupils to certain skill or ability groups, in addition to objective information which may contribute to inequality among pupils. This inequality was expressed specifically in making it difficult for pupils to change between ability groups (Taylor et al., 2019).

Erling et al. (2021) reported on the influence of English teachers' beliefs in English language education, with regard to the learning results of pupils. They noticed a difference between academic secondary schools and middle schools, where teachers of middle schools held lower levels of belief in the learning ability of their pupils to learn English (Erling et al., 2021). Finally, the potential of plurilingual pedagogies to capture inequalities in English language education was also highlighted. Erling et al. (2021) argue that by valuing and utilizing pupils' full language repertoires, pupils' confidence will be enhanced and their diverse linguistic backgrounds will be supported, potentially influencing teachers' attitudes and beliefs in a positive way. Lastly, Halai (2011) reported on teachers' beliefs specifically relating to gender equality. They found that teachers automatically had lower expectations of girls, believing that boys naturally performed better in mathematics and that mathematics was more useful for boys and their careers. Overall, these studies underscore the complex interplay between teacher beliefs, pupil background factors, and instructional practices in shaping perceptions of pupil achievement.

Another factor at the micro-level concerns the *language of instruction (LOI)* that teachers use. Vuzo (2018) findings indicated that the LOI can contribute to dropout rates by hindering students' ability to express themselves, understand lessons, and perform academically, leading to disengagement and lack of confidence. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to note that EEO calls for a language policy that allows for the most effective form of teaching.

Factors at meso-level

At the meso-level of analysis, structures, processes, and practices were explored within the school as an organization, focusing on how teams, leadership and practices influence EEO.

The first factor at the meso-level concerned different practices of *pupil grouping*. One possible way to group pupils involves "ability grouping," where pupils are divided into smaller groups within the classroom, based on perceived abilities. However, according to Werblow et al. (2013), ability grouping is negatively associated with EEO. Pupil grouping disadvantages pupils from underserved groups (e.g., low socio-economic background, migration background) and pupils in lower groups often receive fewer opportunities for academic growth (Werblow et al., 2013). Likewise, Ramberg (2016) mentioned that ability grouping negatively affects low achieving pupils in particular, thus increasing inequity. Consequently, it can be concluded that the use of ability grouping contrasts sharply with providing EEO for all pupils, creating divisions among pupils and, in turn, perpetuating disparities in learning outcomes (Ramberg, 2016).

A second way to group pupils is known as "tracking," in which pupils are assigned to a certain "set" or "group," based on their perceived abilities, and this is not limited to smaller groups within the classroom. It is important that the allocation of pupils to these sets is based on objective criteria. However, Taylor et al. (2019) revealed that subjective criteria, such as teachers' attitudes and beliefs, are often used for this purpose. As a result, pupils from disadvantaged groups are disproportionately placed into low-attainment groups, leading to a reinforcement of inequalities and an increased chance of dropout (Werblow et al., 2013). Consequently, Lynch et al. (2018) noticed that inclusive STEM High Schools (iSHS) explicitly choose not to apply the system of tracking, in order to avoid segregation and inequalities based on socio-economic background. However, it is important to note that a best practice intervention regarding tracking can lead to more EEO (Taylor et al., 2019). The only way to achieve this, is to set clear and unambiguous criteria for allocating pupils into groups, that are based in a clear vision and policies at the school level.

A second factor concerns *student support*. Lynch et al. (2018) mention that iSHS explicitly provides tailored support for pupils from diverse and underrepresented groups, thus contributing to the creation of more EEO. This support entails addressing a range of skills, experiences and difficulties; for example, language barriers.

A third factor concerns *teacher professionalization* (Halai, 2011; Lynch et al., 2018). In her study on EEO for boys and girls, Halai (2011) clearly indicated that a lack of knowledge about equity contributes to fewer educational opportunities for girls. Lynch et al. (2018) also highlighted the importance of teacher professionalization, as it was one of the key success factors of these iSHS. Teacher professionalization ensures educators are well prepared to support diverse pupils, continuously update their pedagogical skills and collaborate to improve their teaching methods. Thus, it can be concluded that professionalization leads to tailored strategies to enhance the EEO of all pupils.

A fourth and closely relating factor concerns *leadership practices*. Williams et al. (2009) took a closer look at how school leaders and their leadership are able to transform their school into a professional learning community. In such a professional learning community, teachers work together intensively, learn from each other and support each other to strive for as many authentic teaching experiences as possible. An important aspect is that these school leaders do not act alone as decision-makers. Instead, they create a team of decision-makers, in order to foster collaboration and empowerment (Williams et al., 2009). Fostering this collective independence yet collective autonomy among teachers is essential in order to accommodate a range of teaching methods and learning needs (Braun et al., 2016). Santamaria also stresses the importance of cooperation between teachers as well as the importance of dialogue and the engagement of everyone in decision-making processes within schools (Santamaría, 2014). With regard to the characteristics of leaders, Santamaría (2014) listed nine characteristics of leadership aimed at social justice and equity. These criteria included (1) engaging in critical conversations, more specifically about issues related to equity; (2) decisions being made only when consensus is achieved with all relevant stakeholders; (3) honoring and respecting all members of the educational community; (4) emphasizing the importance and understanding of how race can impact education; (5) aiming for the greater good, such as school reforms, ethics, etc.; (6) making use of their own (diverse) background and experiences in their leadership; (7) a sense of responsibility beyond their own interest; (8) cultural responsiveness: recognizing, acknowledging and honoring cultural differences and barriers in order to overcome barriers in the educational system, and (9) transformational leadership in which they want to strive for improvement and more equity within education.

A fifth and last factor concerns *school culture and school climate,* a factor that is closely linked to that of leadership. A school climate and culture in which diversity is perceived as a value is crucial for both pupils' academic performance and the extent to which teachers remain committed to their school, i.e., teacher retention (Durand, 2020; Jain et al., 2015). Additionally, a positive school culture should also emphasize empathy, understanding and above all positive relationships between all stakeholders (Parke et al., 2017). When pupils perceive their teachers as people who want to get the best out of them, this has a positive effect on the pupils' academic performance (Braun et al., 2016). In line with this, setting high academic expectations from teachers toward pupils can overcome the effects of socio-economic status on pupil achievement (Werblow et al., 2013). A positive school climate is thus highly important, especially for pupils from underserved groups, such as pupils from racial minorities and pupils living in poverty (Durand, 2020; Jain et al.; 2015). However, school climate is influenced by a multitude of factors, including the school population. For instance, schools with pupils from multiple underserved groups are more likely to have a more negative school climate (Cobb, 2017; Jain et al., 2015). This is confirmed by teachers who tend to report a less positive school climate in low-income

schools (Jain et al., 2015). In order to strive for a positive school climate, it is of the utmost importance to uphold equity and diversity, and make sure that every pupil is treated with respect (Braun et al., 2016).

Interplay between micro-level and meso-level factors

Various factors emerged at both the micro and meso-levels, such as attitudes and beliefs, language of instruction, pupil grouping practices, pupil support, professionalization, leadership practices, and school culture and climate. However, some relationships between these different factors were also noted. The first interplay described is the relationship between teachers' individual attitudes and their classroom grouping practices. Taylor et al. (2019) found a relationship between teachers' more negative attitudes toward students from underserved groups and their placement in lower groups, thus contributing to inequalities. Subsequently, teachers' and principals' attitudes and beliefs also have an impact on the school culture that emerges (Braun et al., 2016). Both Santamaría (2014) and Williams et al. (2009) indicated that the individual characteristics of principals have an impact on their leadership style and, consequently, on school culture and climate. In turn, school climate can again have an impact on teachers' individual attitudes and beliefs on issues such as diversity. More specifically, school culture along with school demographics affect the frames teachers adopt to deal with diversity (Cobb, 2017). A school culture filled with trust and collaboration among staff, affects how teachers interpret and respond to issues of race and class. A supportive professional culture can motivate teachers to express perspectives that challenge color-blind ideology, fostering a more critical awareness of diversity (Cobb, 2017).

Discussion

The aim of this systematic literature review was to provide an overview of various factors within the school environment that influence EEO for all pupils and how these interplay. Previous studies tend to focus only on individual pupil and/or teacher factors that influence EEO. However, the contradictory role that schools play in relation to EEO underscores the need for high-quality studies that provide insights into the various factors within the school environment that influence EEO. This systematic literature review provides insights on factors at both the micro and the meso-level that influence EEO. Furthermore, this review provides initial insights into the interplay between these factors.

Interpretation of findings

The first finding of this study concerns the limited and sparse insights into the interplay between micro and meso-level factors affecting EEO. This is notable, as both the Bronfenbrenner (1980) and Seed (Struyf et al., 2022) models state that interaction between factors at different levels is considered to inherently contribute to the development of an individual, in this case the pupil. However, understanding this interplay is paramount, as educational contexts are often complex and different factors rarely operate in isolation. It is thus remarkable that only a few results emerge about this interplay. The construction of different shells or layers in these theoretical models, which interplay with each other, raises questions about their theoretical conception. Our results show that most studies only provide insights into separate micro or meso-levels or factors, while the aspect of interplay between levels remains understudied.

This suggests that, while there is a lot of knowledge about individual factors, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of the dynamic interplay between factors at both the micro and meso-level. This lacuna and underexposure of the interplay between factors at the micro and meso-level thus indicates a clear need for further research.

From the few reviewed studies which do address the interplay between micro- and meso-level factors, the present study identifies the key role of school leadership in promoting EEO. Acting as mediators between the (national) policy level and classroom practices on a micro and meso-level, school leaders play a fundamental role in shaping the educational practices and thus also in the pursuit of EEO. More specifically, school leaders and their leadership practices lie at the base of the interplay between these different levels. School leaders play a crucial role in establishing a school culture and climate, which in turn impacts teachers' attitudes and beliefs, their level of professionalization, and their sense of shared responsibility, among other factors. Indeed, research highlighted this rather delicate position of school leaders in which they have to maintain a balance between government policies and keeping their staff motivated (Miller, 2019). Leadership that strives for EEO requires critical thinking and, above all, a willingness to question existing issues and practices (Brown, 2004; Shields and Hesbol, 2020; Ward et al., 2015). To achieve this, it is of the utmost importance that leaders place a high value on professionalization. Creating a culture of continuous reflection and improvement will therefore lead to teachers responding better to changing pupils' changing needs and challenges. In this way, the school team will be able to respond flexibly and to fully support and do justice to the increasing diversity within the school in innovative ways (Alam and Mohanty, 2023; Brown, 2004; Pantić and Florian, 2015; Rouse, 2008; Williams et al., 2009).

Despite limited insights regarding the interplay between micro and meso-level factors, single factors positively affecting EEO at the micro- and meso-level—as operationalized in the Seed-model—emerged from the review. At the micro-level, teachers' attitudes and beliefs emerged as an important factor. This is in line with a wide body of research on the role of teachers' attitudes in shaping EEO, where studies found that teachers' implicit attitudes tend to favor pupils from non-underserved groups, and thus leading to educational inequalities. Additionally, these negative attitudes are often accompanied by different (mostly lower) expectations toward pupils from underserved groups, in turn influencing the teacher's practices, the educational opportunities and, thus, the academic career of these pupils (Byrd, 2020; Costa et al., 2021; Denessen et al., 2022; Gortazar et al., 2022; Pit-ten Cate and Glock, 2019; Turetsky et al., 2021). Fortunately, literature shows that these negative influences can also be mitigated through careful professionalization. For example, in addition to raising teacher awareness of implicit expectations, prejudices and biases, teacher

trainings or professionalization initiatives focusing on these topics also provide insight into how these expectations affect teachers' teaching methods. Consequently, this has a positive effect on their teaching practices and how teachers strive for equal educational opportunities, which in turn affects how well each pupil performs (Doyle et al., 2023; Starck et al., 2020).

At the meso-level, both ability grouping as well as tracking were found to relate to increasing inequalities between pupils, often disadvantaging pupils from underserved groups. This is in line with previous research stating that tracking often perpetuates inequalities between pupils (Schindler et al., 2024; Terrin and Triventi, 2023; Van De Werfhorst and Mijs, 2010). As a possible explanation for this, Taylor et al. (2019), showed that the decisions in this classification of pupils often rely on subjective information such as teachers' attitudes rather than objective information, such as test results. This is in line with the previous findings of Batruch et al. (2023), who found that tracking recommendations rely on biased information. However, this finding also requires nuance. Indeed, Taylor et al. (2019) and Mulkey et al. (2005) also mentioned that ability grouping—when based on objective information, clear objectives and embedded in a clear policy—can lead to more collaboration between pupils, better learning outcomes and thus, less inequality.

Finally, school culture and climate play a critical role in promoting EEO. A culture where all pupils feel valued and supported, fosters a space where everyone can thrive. Positive relationships among teachers, pupils and parents, alongside a focus on collaboration and respect, further enhance this atmosphere. The principal's leadership is key in shaping this culture. Through a clear vision and proactive leadership, the school leadership lays the foundation for a positive environment. This brings us back to the beginning: leadership is essential for advancing EEO, as previously highlighted. Moreover, leadership is the connecting factor that links different levels, ensuring that all efforts to promote EEO work together smoothly.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

The strength of the present study lies on its strong methodological foundation and systematic approach. A systematic literature review approach was performed in order to gain insight into various factors within the school environment that influence EEO for all pupils. A research protocol was established in advance and was closely followed during the selection and screening process. During this research process, two reviewers adhered to the PRISMA guidelines in a sequential manner. Finally, the selected articles were all subjected to a quality screening using the QATSDD. To conclude, this study was conducted in a step-wise and careful manner.

Most of the studies included in this review originate from the United States (N = 8), a pattern that may be influenced by the choice of specific search terms such as "equity" and "equal," which are commonly emphasized in American educational research. Research indicates that most studies on these concepts take place primarily in the US (Bray, 2018; Jurado De Los Santos et al., 2020). While these concepts are fundamental and essential to the discussion of EEO, they can represent a viewpoint that is more common in the United States. This emphasis could result in a narrower range of perspectives within the review, as the concept of EEO varies widely in its definitions and the associated terminology (Edgar, 2022; Jurado De Los Santos et al., 2020; Levinson et al., 2022), thereby possibly shaping the findings of the study while potentially overlooking other relevant research. Including search terms such as "social justice" of "fairness" might have led to a more varied international selection of studies. Still, the emphasis on "equity" and "equal" is in line with the purpose of this research, which is to compile studies that specifically deal with the subject of equal educational opportunities. Because of this, the review provides insightful information about how this idea is perceived and researched, particularly in relation to the US.

Although macro-level factors such as policy and legislation play an important role in EEO, this study chose to focus on both micro and meso-level factors as well as how they interplay. By doing so, the study allowed for an examination of factors that directly impact EEO for all pupils, which can lead to insights that schools can directly implement. Though it is of utmost importance to recognize the importance of the macro-level factors, these would require a different scope of analysis. Therefore, future research should take an integrated and comprehensive approach, where more insight can be gained into the interplay of influencing factors in a qualitative and in-depth manner. In addition, the integrated approach ensures greater support from all key actors and addresses the collective responsibility of all actors to pursue EEO.

Conclusion and future research

School leaders play a key role in achieving equal educational opportunities for all pupils. They act as the pivot between educational policy at the national level and school culture and practices at micro and meso-level. It became clear that there is a need for more research into the interplay between factors at different levels that influence EEO for all pupils. The purpose of this SLR was to identify factors in the school environment that promote EEO and gain insights into how these factors interplay, since previous studies have tended to focus on individual pupil and/or teacher factors. Derived from these findings, the current study promotes an integrated and holistic approach to the concept of EEO in education. This way, schools can develop targeted strategies for promoting EEO for all pupils.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

KH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing, Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology. LS: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review and editing.

EE: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review and editing.
KS: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1568713/full#supplementary-material

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