# P107 / Bringing space and place into education policy analysis and practice

**Topic :** Other

**Chair :** Clara Fontdevila (Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona)

**Second Chair :** Anja Giudici (Cardiff University)

**Third Chair :** Adrian Zancajo (Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Place and space are becoming increasingly relevant in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies. Whether interventions should be tailored to local contexts or remain spatially blind has been intensely debated in the regional development policy literature (Barca et al., 2012). More recently, persistent territorial disparities, geographically uneven effects of major economic and social trends, and related discontent have brought into prominence place-based policies that account for variations in local needs and capacities across various domains (Beer et al., 2020). Yet, these debates have centred on whether interventions should be place-based, with less attention to the tools and policy processes through which such approaches are designed, governed and implemented (Klepac et al., 2023).

Education, moreover, has largely remained at the margins of these debates. Despite the role it plays for local communities, the implications of place-based approaches for education policy have received relatively scant attention. While the spatial turn in education has brought into sharp relief the uneven distribution of provision and its role in shaping educational inequalities (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2017), there has been limited engagement with developments in public policy studies that emphasise that policy processes and instruments shape and are shaped by these spatial patterns (Brenner, 2004; Michener, 2018). Indeed, research examining the relationship between place, space and education policy is still emerging and fragmentary, with little dialogue between different approaches to space and place, and between different scales and dimensions of spatial inequalities. This contrasts with the more systematic engagement with spatial perspectives found in other areas such as public health, environmental policy or urban planning (Stead, 2021; Hannum et al., 2025).

This panel seeks to bring spatial perspectives on education into dialogue with public policy studies. Several theories of the policy process already carry a spatial dimension, from the place-bound construction of target populations (Sidney, 2005) to spatial policy instruments (Stead, 2021) and territorially uneven feedback effects (Michener, 2018), although their potential for education policy analysis remains largely unexplored. The panel thus builds on the premise that connecting these perspectives can deepen our understanding of how education policies shape, and are shaped by, space and place. This dialogue offers three main advantages. First, it invites us to consider how spatial inequalities are constituted as a policy problem, and how places and their populations are constructed as policy targets, drawing on the social constructionist approach (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Second, it connects levels of analysis that are typically addressed separately, including territorial disparities between subnational units; the distribution of resources within education systems; and the spatial imaginaries and strategies mobilised by different actors to navigate spatially uneven opportunities. This directly speaks to research on multilevel governance and the role of local contexts in the implementation of public policies (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Sausman et al., 2016). Third, it creates opportunities for methodological cross-fertilisation, by bringing approaches extending beyond quantitative GIS (such as qualitative GIS and spatial ethnography) into dialogue with public policy analysis and thus broadening the analytical repertoire for studying the spatial dimensions of education policy.

By drawing together researchers working on spatial inequalities related to education policy, the panel addresses four questions:

- What are the theoretical, analytical and normative implications of foregrounding the spatial and place-based dimension in education policy analysis?

- What methodological approaches and advances can best support the analysis of education policy from spatial and place-based perspectives?

- How do spatial inequalities shape the design, implementation and effectiveness of education policy instruments?

- What is the potential of place-based and place-sensitive approaches for more effectively addressing

spatial inequalities in education, and how can education policy incorporate them?

**References**


Barca, F., McCann, P., & Rodríguez?Pose, A. (2012). The case for regional development intervention: place?based versus place?neutral approaches. Journal of Regional Science, 52(1), 134-152.

Beer, A., McKenzie, F., Blažek, J., Sotarauta, M., & Ayres, S. (2020). Every place matters. Routledge.

Brenner, N. (2004). New state spaces: Urban governance and the rescaling of statehood. Oxford University Press.

Butler, T., & Hamnett, C. (2007). The geography of education. Urban Studies, 44(7), 1161-1174.

Hannum, K., Wellstead, A. M., Howlett, M., & Gofen, A. (2025). Leveraging GIS for policy design: Spatial analytics as a strategic tool. Policy Design and Practice, 8(1), 35–49.

Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2003). Unraveling the central state, but how? Types of multi-level governance. American Political Science Review, 97(2), 233-243.

Klepac, B., Mowle, A., Riley, T., & Craike, M. (2023). Government, governance, and place-based approaches: Lessons from and for public policy. Health Research Policy and Systems, 21, 126.

Lubienski, C., & Lee, J. (2017). Geo?spatial analyses in education research. Geographical Research, 55(1), 89-99.

Michener, J. (2018). Fragmented democracy: Medicaid, federalism, and unequal politics. Cambridge University Press.

Sausman, C., Oborn, E., & Barrett, M. (2016). Policy translation through localisation: implementing national policy in the UK. Policy & Politics, 44(4), 563-589.

Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (1993). Social construction of target populations. American Political Science Review, 87(2), 334–347.

Sidney, M. S. (2005). Contested images of race and place: The politics of housing discrimination. In A. L. Schneider & H. M. Ingram (Eds.), Deserving and entitled: Social constructions and public policy (pp. 111–137). SUNY Press.

Stead, D. (2021). Conceptualizing the policy tools of spatial planning. Journal of Planning Literature, 36(3), 297–311.


## CALL FOR PAPERS

Space and place have gained prominence in public policy studies, as reflected in debates on place-based versus spatially blind interventions and growing attention to territorial disparities and localisation. However, these debates have paid less attention to how policy processes and instruments shape and are shaped by spatial patterns, and education has remained largely at their margins. Even if education research has documented how space shapes educational opportunities and outcomes, connections between spatial inequalities, education policy and policy process theories remain underanalysed. The gap derived from such limited cross-fertilisation is compounded by fragmented research and limited dialogue across thematic and disciplinary boundaries.

This panel aims to establish a dialogue on spatial inequalities in education from a public policy perspective. It will examine how education policies respond to and may contribute to addressing spatially uneven educational opportunities and outcomes. We welcome contributions that consider how spatial inequalities become objects of public action, how they influence education policy processes, and the impact of policy in addressing them. The panel invites contributions addressing these themes:

- Conceptualising and operationalising the spatial dimension in education from a public policy perspective, with particular attention to the theoretical, analytical and normative implications of foregrounding space and place in education policy.

- Advancing and integrating methodological approaches to the study of the spatial dimension in education, with an emphasis on the possibilities created by methodological innovations such as qualitative GIS, spatial ethnographies or mixed-methods designs.

- Examining how spatial and territorial disparities shape policy, exploring how disparities across places in institutional capacities, local conditions and patterns of education provision affect policy design and implementation, and how such differences may translate into uneven policy effects across space. We particularly welcome contributions drawing on theories of the policy process, such as the construction of places and populations as policy targets, policy instruments, implementation and policy feedback.

- Exploring how education policy can respond to spatially uneven educational opportunities and outcomes, including the potential and limitations of territorially differentiated and other place-based approaches and

policy instruments, and considering dimensions of spatial justice extending beyond redistribution to account for questions of recognition and representation.

We welcome papers examining these themes across contexts, education levels and spatial scales. Conceptual papers may critically engage with the approaches and frameworks through which spatial inequalities in education can be interrogated from a public policy perspective, whereas empirical contributions may examine how these relationships unfold within single cases or comparatively across settings.