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Countering Educational Poverty by Raising Learning Outcomes of Young People

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Introduction

The decline in German students' performance in the PISA study is a cause for great concern. Good education is the most important basis for our prosperity ... In math and reading, the performance of 15-year-olds is a whole school year behind where it was just four years ago. This decline in educational results is unprecedented. Performance has even fallen below the level that triggered the first PISA shock about 20 years ago. In this most recent study, German students' performance in mathematics dropped by 25 PISA points, which will cost Germany around EUR 14 trillion in economic output by the end of the century.

(ifo Institute, 2023)

The above statement, made by Ludger Wößmann, Director of the renowned German ifo Center for the Economics of Education, calls attention to the results of the latest PISA study¹ announced on 5 December 2023. Large-scale studies of this kind not only provide policymakers and the public with evidence and data, they also call attention to the quality of education. Around the world, such observations and comments appear every time the PISA results or other similar findings are announced, leading to overheated debates about the quality of education. In the comparative statistical measurements these studies generate, certain regions, districts, schools and even groups of people inevitably perform worse than others. This is often termed 'underachievement'. A dominant, albeit not unquestioned, response to low levels of academic achievement is expression of the need to enhance the learning outcomes of those who underperform.

This, we argue, is a cause for great concern. Currently, learning outcomes are theorized as measurable and objectifiable indicators, the quality of which can be enhanced and governed through targeted and scalable policy measures (Ure, 2015). In the introductory statement by Wößmann, we make three observations which support this widespread yet, in our understanding, highly reductionist claim.

First, when we look closely at the statement, behind the overt focus on learning outcomes is the economic revenue provided by education. The quote suggests there is a direct link between educational performance and economic prosperity, implying that investing in education leads to higher economic output and prosperity. This, in turn, legitimizes the policy interventions aimed at enhancing learning outcomes of low-achieving populations. The statement also implies that there exists a general agreement on what fifteen-year-olds (as much as nine-, ten- or thirteen-year-olds) should know by their age, and that it is a legitimate political concern of the state to indicate the appropriate amount of knowledge to hold and require it of them. As mentioned, across-country and within-country comparisons highlight the strongest and the weakest parts of the education system; that is, the low-performing and well-performing regions/districts/schools and so forth. This puts additional pressure on schools, teachers, parents and, above all, students to enhance their achievements if they wish to be competitive and successful. In doing so, the quality of learning outcomes is gradually individualized and dependent on individual performance and responsibility, rather than institutional and/or socio-structural conditions. Finally, the introductory quote indicates that learning performances can only go one way: up. Comparing the current results with previous periods or other countries constitutes a precedent so that, even if the overall performances steadily improve, the concern of losing pace or even returning to previous results is omnipresent. The ongoing assessment, thereby, creates educational issues of its own kind, requiring constant and more fine-grained data collection to support local/regional policymaking towards reducing educational disparities.

In contrast to these observed claims, we shall argue that using the statistical measurements of learning outcomes as the only reliable source of information to support evidence-based policymaking leads to a reductionist and instrumental vision of education. On the one hand, it primarily accounts for learning performances in formal education, bracketing out all skills and competencies obtained in non-formal or informal learning settings. Although there have been considerable adjustments to validate competencies acquired in non-formal and informal settings (CEDEFOP, 2024; Ure, 2019), they largely remain at the level

of recommendations or recognized best practices, being rarely integrated and/or accounted for in international large-scale assessments (Johnson & Majewska, 2024). On the other hand, due to the very nature of comparing and rating large-scale data sets, the collection of quantitative data leads to the identification of presumably poor-performing groups of young people. These groups are, then, very likely to be targeted by policy measures, even though they might not perceive themselves as in need of assistance (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019). Against this background, what understanding of learning and education does the statistical measurement of learning performances establish? And what are its positive and negative effects on young people? With these research questions in mind, we aim to highlight a need to redefine the current conception of learning outcomes and stimulate more context-sensitive research and policy approaches. In this chapter, we refer to an ongoing research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR)² and proceed in three steps. First, we look at the research and policy discourses on learning outcomes and underachievement to identify the main lines of argument used to support policy approaches seeking to counter educational poverty. Second, we present the socio-economic and educational differences between young Europeans in a sample of countries to single out groups considered most at risk of underachievement and most likely to be targeted by policy measures. In our concluding statement, we describe the effects of the pervasive discourse on learning outcomes and its impact on young people and propose to reframe the conceptualization of learning outcomes as reliable sources of educational quality.

Emerging discourse on learning outcomes

In the first part of this section, we describe the research discourse on learning outcomes and underachievement and identify the underlying assumptions behind it. In the second part, we look at how the prevailing understanding of learning outcomes shapes the policy measures targeting young people with low levels of learning performances.

Research discourse on learning outcomes and underachievement

During the last couple of decades, in Europe and beyond, we have witnessed a remarkable interest in measuring and comparing learning outcomes,

particularly in large-scale international studies such as PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The aim of each of these studies is to provide information to policymakers and other educational stakeholders about how national education systems perform compared to those in other countries. PISA has been especially influential in producing standardized comparisons of learning outcomes across countries.

Referring to the growing interest towards standardized comparisons of learning outcomes, Biesta (2009) speaks about the rise of a ‘measurement culture’ of education which has had a strong impact, not only on national and supranational educational policies but, also, on schooling practices of local schools and teachers. In a culture which emphasizes performativity of education systems and actors, Biesta argues, means become ends in themselves and discussion about the purpose of education, including the question of what constitutes a ‘good’ education, disappears from the educational agenda. The roots of this development can be traced back in history to several points.

To begin with, the behaviourist tradition, first developed in the early twentieth century in the field of psychology (Watson, 1913), departs from the assumption that a clear identification and measurement of learning is only possible by detailed definitions of externally observable behaviour (Bloom et al., 1956). Since the 1960s, the behaviourist approach has been criticized for its inability to account for longer, more complex and abstract learning processes. Despite this critique, the behaviourist approach remains prominent in the current research on learning outcomes – as Murtonen, Gruber & Lehtinen (2017) showed in a review of ninety scientific articles from the years 1999–2015 – and it has been intensively disseminated to higher education as a part of the European Bologna process.

In the mid-1980s, the US government called for examination of the effectiveness of public spending in higher education. To determine this, it looked at what graduates knew by the point of their graduation. As Maureen Tam (2014, p. 159) has highlighted, this marked the beginning of the ‘assessment movement’ through which ‘ideas about what constitutes a high-quality education have shifted from the traditional view of what teachers provide to a practical concern for what learners actually learn, achieve, and become’.

Thus, since the late twentieth century, learning outcomes are increasingly expected to become objectifiable and measurable so that, on the one hand, policymakers could see visible outcomes of their efforts (Holmes, 2013) and, on the other hand, employers could expect work-ready and competent graduates

with no need for extra qualifications (Clarke, 2018). The large-scale assessment studies support this trend and generate 'foreseeable' futures by highlighting tendencies and paving the way for policy interventions which may otherwise not occur. Another aspect of measuring learning outcomes, however, is the construction of groups of 'underachievers'.

Defining and measuring learning outcomes leads to standardization of educational outcomes. Standards are normative. They create and convey ideals and social norms and provide tools to compare and rank individuals, groups, institutions and systems (Rinne et al., 2020). Social norms about an adequate level of educational achievement inevitably divide individuals into achievers and underachievers. In Europe, educational underachievement has become a significant policy issue, backed up by large-scale studies such as PISA. It has raised concerns regarding both efficiency and equality of school education. But it has, also, legitimized policy interventions to prevent, or at least reduce, the educational poverty of certain groups of young people. However, when it comes to defining underachievement, this differs across disciplines.

In the field of psychology, educational underachievement is described as the difference between expected and actual achievement (when not due to a learning disability) or the discrepancy between ability and achievement (Chere & Hlalele, 2014; Mazrekaj, De Witte & Triebs, 2022). In studies based on educational psychology, various kinds of ability testing are typically used. Since there is no established methodology to test ability, different researchers have used different methodologies with differing results (Smith, 2003). This was observed, for example, in a systematic literature review which examined underachievement among gifted students (White, Graham & Blaas, 2018), as well as in a Spanish study which compared the results produced by different statistical methods of the identification of underachieving students in secondary education. Depending on the method used, the percentage of underachieving students varied from 14.55 to 30.37 per cent (Veas et al., 2016). Furthermore, studies (see Chere & Hlalele, 2014) have shown that underachievement occurs at all ability levels and that several factors, both individual-related and environmental, are suspected of affecting it. The individual difference approach holds that the roots of underachievement lie within the individual and are usually attributed to intellectual, motivational, behavioural or emotional problems of the learner, whereas environmental factors typically comprise those within the school and the family. From the perspective of family, underachievement is attributed to social relationships and interactions within a family as well as the family's inability to support the child's schooling and learning. Regarding

school factors, the reasons for a learner's underachievement have been seen as originating from classroom and school cultures, teacher-student relationships, teacher expectations and performance as well as from peer relationships at school (Chere & Hlalele, 2014).

In the field of educational sociology, underachievement typically refers to a relative position of a certain group which is performing worse than others. Studies show that working-class students are underachievers in relation to middle-class students, boys tend to underachieve in comparison to girls in reading and writing, and ethnic minority students tend to underachieve relative to students from the ethnic majority (McCoach & Siegle, 2011). In these examples, one can also speak of relatively low-attaining groups instead of underachieving groups (Plewis, 1991). This perspective on underachievement is more often used in the policy discussions on poor academic performances and the achievement gaps between cohorts of young people. As research shows, the achievement gap between young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds can start in childhood and persist, and even increase, over the course of school years (e.g. Bali & Alvarez, 2004; Kuhfeld, Gershoff & Paschall, 2018). Moreover, educational underachievement has long-term consequences for the whole life course. Young people who underperform in school are more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment, lower earnings and higher rates of unemployment in adulthood. Furthermore, the consequences of school dropout and educational exclusion are unequal among young people with different socio-economic backgrounds. After dropping out, young people with more advantaged social backgrounds are more likely able to establish stable employment careers than those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Järvinen, 2020).

Policymakers have attempted to reduce these negative effects in formal education which have been identified in the research. However, despite numerous attempts, but also due to unforeseen events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, educational poverty continues to persist, especially among groups in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions (Parreira do Amaral, Kovacheva & Rambla, 2019). In the next section, therefore, we will look at the main sources informing policy discourse on learning outcomes and underachievement.

Policy discourse on learning outcomes

In Europe, underachievement among young adults aged from eighteen to twenty-nine years is less visible in social policy frameworks than it is among

the fifteen-year-olds. Although European policies recognize the socio-economic consequences of educational underachievement, the present emphasis is mostly on young people aged fifteen years who exhibit a perceived subpar proficiency in reading, mathematics and science. Informed predominantly by PISA findings, national and European policy approaches tend to develop strategies aimed at countering educational poverty without acknowledging the complexity of factors affecting academic underachievement of young people. Yet there is a diversity of recent studies which also inform policymaking in Europe. We will briefly summarize them according to their overarching themes.

One key factor occurring in the research literature concerns the structural and institutional conditions affecting young people. Several studies have explored the relationship between various socio-economic characteristics, including socio-economic background, migrant status and parents' educational level, and their impact on different learning outcomes (e.g. Cutmore et al., 2018; Van der Graaf et al., 2019; Volante et al., 2019). Based on their findings, the European policy discourse has started acknowledging that underachievement arises from a confluence of individual, familial, educational, societal and economic variables which are intricately interconnected, resulting in circumstances of compounded disadvantage (Parveva et al., 2020). More so, specific institutional aspects of education systems, such as limited availability of high-quality early childhood education and care, early tracking, segregation and grade repetition, can exacerbate existing disparities, which is particularly detrimental for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although these conditions are becoming well-recognized, young people have little influence over them. Their learning performances, however, can heavily depend on them.

The research informing policymaking also indicates that the immediate learning environment has a decisive impact on the ability of young people to achieve their learning goals. Numerous studies (e.g. Castro et al., 2015; Hill & Tyson, 2009) have demonstrated that parental involvement in education is crucial to academic success. Parental involvement boosts academic performance, reduces absenteeism and burnout, and improves social skills, school behaviour and peer relationships. Parents with higher levels of education and socio-economic status are typically more involved in their child's schooling (Kim et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021), thereby providing their children with potentially more benefits (Tan, Lyu & Peng, 2020). On the contrary, socio-economically disadvantaged students may lack a positive and supportive home environment and educational resources such as study area, homework space, digital facilities or uninterrupted time. In low-income families, parents may encounter high

levels of stress which can incite or exacerbate family conflicts or violence. This can have a negative impact on families' involvement in home-based and school-based activities and parent-school cooperation (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hedlin, 2019). In the long run, such factors in a student's home learning environment can lower educational attainment and increase the likelihood of intergenerational poverty transfer (European Commission, 2019a).

Other studies look to the immediate 'formal' learning environment and suggest that academic underachievement is rooted in school practices and linked to school curriculum (Olenchak, 2001; Rimm & Lovance, 1992), the teacher-student relationship (Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016), school quality and classroom climate (Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2013). Policymakers have recognized that school and classroom practices, teacher and staff attitudes, and teaching and learning styles can affect children and youth's motivation and commitment to education (Parveva et al., 2020).

Finally, research guiding policymaking highlights that individual motivation and engagement are crucial to students' academic success. For example, students in otherwise high-risk positions, such as immigrants from low-income backgrounds, perform better in math when they, personally, hold high academic expectations (Cutmore et al., 2018). Individual performance also closely correlates with gender. For instance, statistics demonstrate that, in most EU countries, males are more likely than females to discontinue their education and training early (Staring et al., 2021).

Many of the aspects and factors affecting educational underachievement in Europe are visible in the 2022 Commission's Staff Working Document (European Commission, 2022) which is accompanied by the *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success* (The Council of the European Union, 2022). These policy documents comprise a new action framework which describes a systemic approach for improving success at school. Besides decreasing the proportion of individuals with low academic performance and early school leavers, the proposed Council Recommendation aims to separate educational achievement from social, economic and cultural status to meet the 2030 European Education Area targets, such as reducing the percentage of early school leavers to less than 9 per cent, or the fifteen-year-old low-achievers to less than 15 per cent (Council Resolution, 2021).

Recently, there has been a notable transition in education systems, namely from a conventional 'content-focused' model to a more inclusive 'competence-based' approach to education and training. This shift is rooted in a learner-centred perspective, emphasizing the development of individual abilities and

the capacity to effectively utilize and critically evaluate acquired knowledge (Siarova, Sternadel & Mašidlauskaitė, 2017). Equally, the European Commission has developed a set of key skills and competencies considered necessary to meet current and future labour market demands (European Commission, 2019b).

From these two recent developments, we can conclude that European policies recognize the need for equal and inclusive education and, at the same time, seek to redress the existing inequalities and educational poverty by raising learning performances of young people. In this regard, the prevailing conceptualization of learning outcomes as measurable, adjustable, and scalable instruments which can prevent a range of negative social and educational issues may oversimplify the complex relations in which they are constructed and ignore the unique set of regional and national actors and factors involved in this process. We argue, in the next section, that such a reduction of complexities can, paradoxically, worsen the existing vulnerabilities that young people in Europe face.

Vulnerabilities faced by European youth

In this section, we analyse statistical data on educational attainment levels, early school leaving (ESL), and not in employment, education or training (NEET) rates from the Eurostat database to contextualize, compare and frame the current situation of young people in the eight European countries participating in the CLEAR project: Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Using data from Eurostat and applying an intersectional perspective, we explore how overlapping factors, such as gender, socio-economic background and space, shape education and employment outcomes. This approach challenges the reductionist reliance on quantitative measurements of learning outcomes which often obscure the deeper inequalities shaping young people's experiences.

Analysing the levels of educational attainment³ in the years 2014⁴ and 2021 (Figure 2.1) across the CLEAR countries highlights both stark disparities and evolving trends.

In 2021, the share of young adults with lower secondary education or below varied substantially among the CLEAR countries. Greece had the lowest share at 7.1 per cent, followed by Finland (9.7 per cent) and Austria (10.6 per cent). In contrast, Spain (27.7 per cent) and Italy (23.2 per cent) faced considerably higher proportions, with Bulgaria (17.3 per cent), Portugal (16.7 per cent) and Germany (15.5 per cent) forming a middle grouping in the middle of the selected countries. The distribution of educational attainment reflects distinct

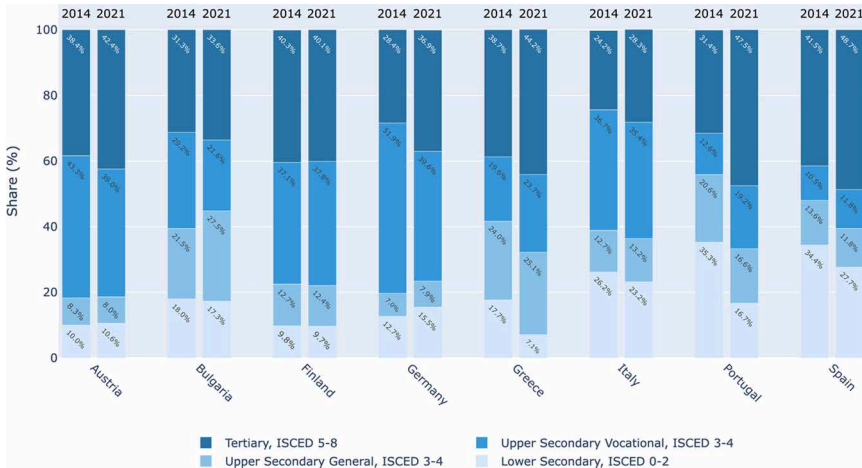


Figure 2.1 Educational attainment by ISCED levels (2014 vs. 2021).

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat (2023a).

national characteristics. Austria and Germany are characterized by high levels of vocational qualifications and tertiary education, supported by their robust dual education systems. Both countries also display a trend of ‘academization’ in the dual system, with post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) programmes considered short-cycle tertiary education (Deissinger, 2019). Finland’s distribution closely mirrors Austria and Germany’s, with strong vocational education (an average of 38 per cent) and consistently high tertiary attainment levels. While Italy has high levels of vocational qualifications, it stands out for its relatively high shares of lower educational attainment and one of CLEAR countries’ lowest tertiary attainment rates. Meanwhile, Greece has demonstrated remarkable progress, halving its lower educational attainment levels since 2014 while expanding vocational and tertiary qualifications. Portugal and Spain are notable for their polarization between lower and higher educational attainment (Teixeira et al., 2021). Both countries have reduced this disparity by decreasing low educational levels and expanding tertiary attainment.

A significant progression in tertiary educational attainment (ISCED 5–8) was observed in most European countries. However, distinct gender patterns emerged. In every EU country, the proportion of young women with tertiary education is higher than that of young men. Although young women are now more likely to receive a higher education level than men (Figure 2.2), there is clear field segregation. Female students dominate areas such as education, health and

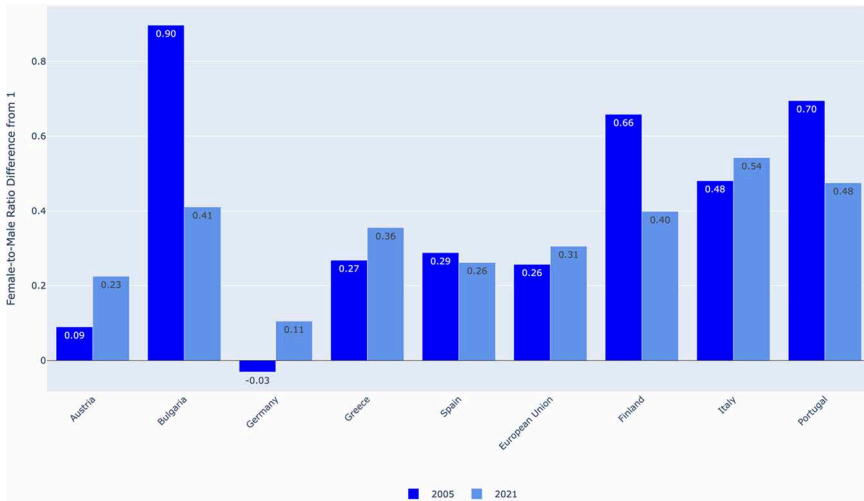


Figure 2.2 Educational attainment, 25–34 years ISCED 5–8 by female-to-male ratio, 2005–2021.

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat (2023a).

welfare while they are still underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) studies (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018; Madison et al., 2022). Additionally, women remain significantly underrepresented in research positions. The gendered division of labour and field segregation can exacerbate socio-economic disparities, especially when women are disproportionately represented in lower-paying sectors.

However, the extent of this gender gap varies considerably. The gap is relatively narrow in Austria and Germany, for example, possibly reflecting more balanced participation in higher education programmes (Ziemann, 2015). In contrast, Portugal exemplifies the much wider gap occurring in other countries, suggesting that traditional gender roles may influence educational choices more strongly in some contexts. In post-industrial societies, women outperform men in educational attainment, despite large cross-country variation. The differences in male-female educational attainment might be explained by their emancipatory contexts, which vary over time and across countries and which may limit or encourage women’s access to higher education (Van Hek, Kraaykamp & Wolbers, 2016).

In vocational education, the trend is reversed, with men significantly outnumbering women in most countries (De Hauw, Grow & Van Bavel, 2017). This pattern suggests that vocational training pathways may align more closely

with traditionally male-dominated fields, such as manufacturing, engineering and technical trades. In some countries, the disparity is particularly stark, reinforcing that specific sectors remain largely inaccessible or unattractive to women (Bridges et al., 2022).

Young men are generally overrepresented among those with lower educational attainment, highlighting challenges they may face in completing secondary education. This trend is especially pronounced in countries where economic pressures or societal expectations may prematurely push young men into the labour market, such as Finland (Ågren, 2024). In contrast, some countries with emerging markets (e.g. Eastern Europe) show the reverse, with young women more likely to have lower educational attainment. This is suggestive of regional or cultural factors disproportionately limiting their access to or completion of formal education.

Another relevant indicator of learning outcomes is the rate of ESL. The European Commission measures early dropout from education and estimates 'insufficient' qualification levels within the EU population (Kuusipalo & Alastalo, 2020; Struffolino & Borgna, 2021). In 2021, Austria, Finland and Portugal recorded early school leaving below the EU average. Greece had the lowest rate of ESL, with only 2 per cent for women and 3 per cent for men (Figure 2.3).

Measures facilitating transitions within Greece's education and training systems, alongside alternative pathways such as second-chance education and career guidance, have played a pivotal role in reducing dropout rates. A notable feature of the Greek system is that all students follow a unified curriculum until age sixteen, and second-chance education programmes align with the same curriculum, providing seamless reintegration for those who leave education early. Additionally, only a small proportion of schools (3.5 per cent of primary and 6.0 per cent of secondary schools) are classified by the Ministry of Education as difficult to access (Roussakis, 2017).

While the Europe 2020 Strategy successfully reduced ESL to below 10 per cent in many countries, and the European Education Area aims to push this target below 9 per cent, disparities continue to persist. Among the CLEAR countries, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Spain have relatively high shares of early leaving from education and training. The gender difference is most pronounced in Spain where men vastly outnumber women. Indeed, men still leave education and training earlier than women in most countries, with Bulgaria being the notable exception where female students drop out of school more often than their male counterparts. At first glance, this might suggest the need for tailored policy measures targeting male early school leavers. However, the reasons behind early

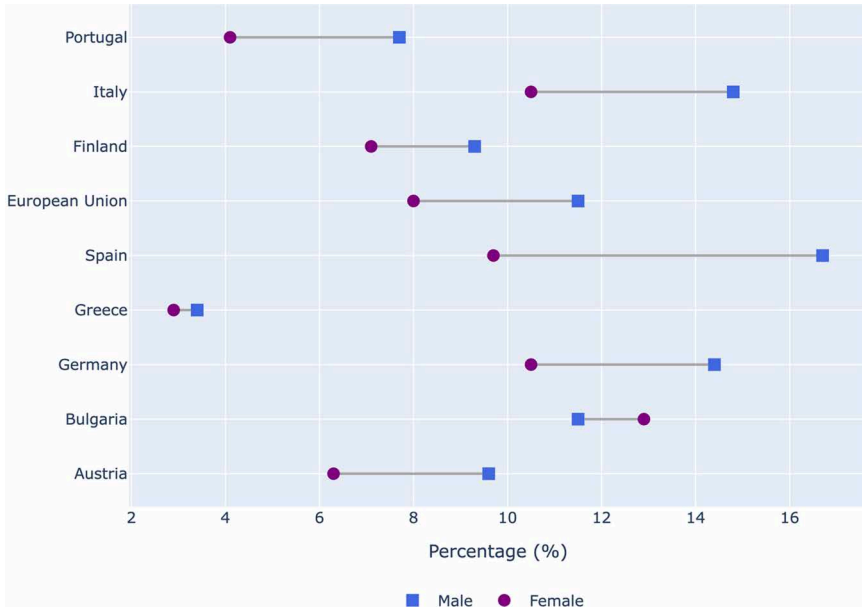


Figure 2.3 Early school leaving rates in 2021.

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat (2023b).

school leaving are multi-faceted and often context-specific, as evidenced by research (Gitschthaler & Holzmayer, 2023; Santos et al., 2020). For instance, migration-related factors may influence this pattern, as some female students from migrant backgrounds face unique challenges in accessing and completing education (Bembich, 2023; Cascino, 2023). The societal and political framing of ESL as a uniformly negative phenomenon further complicates efforts to address its causes. This framing assumes a universal understanding of ‘early’ leaving, disregarding young people’s diverse socio-economic, spatial and intersectional conditions.

In our examination, we also considered the NEET rate. Individuals in the NEET category face significant risk of marginalization and exclusion from the workforce (Thompson, 2011). The rate also reveals pronounced gender disparities, often to the detriment of women, and it is linked to the CLEAR regions’ Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Figure 2.4).

An increase in GDP generally correlates with lower NEET rates, as economic stability supports smoother transitions from education to employment (De Luca, 2020). This trend is evident in Austria and Germany, where strong

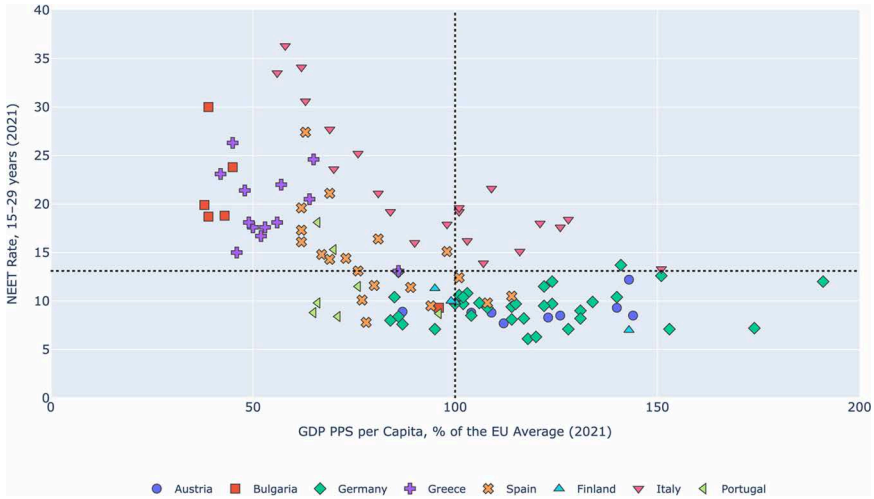


Figure 2.4 NEET rate, 15–29 years by GDP PPS (2021).

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat (2023c) and Eurostat (2024).⁵

socio-economic conditions and robust dual vocational systems minimize regional disparities and reduce NEET rates. Similarly, Finnish regions with high economic output consistently show low NEET rates.

However, the relationship varies across Europe. Low economic output is strongly associated with high NEET rates in many Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese regions. Of course, exceptions exist: some wealthy Italian regions have high NEET rates while specific German, Portuguese and Spanish regions maintain low NEET rates despite relatively low GDP (Bruno, Marelli & Signorelli, 2014). For example, Burgenland, South-Eastern Bulgaria, Brandenburg, Galicia and mainland Portuguese regions demonstrate that local policies and social support can counteract the challenges of low economic output.

While financial crises may have levelled NEET rates in regions like North-Eastern Italy, leaving GDP largely unaffected (Caroleo et al., 2020), several countries, including Italy and Spain, shifted from below-average NEET rates in 2007 to above-average rates in 2021, highlighting persistent socio-economic inequalities. This worrying trend underscores the need to address economic growth and structural and regional disparities to advance European outcomes for young adults.

As mentioned, higher educational levels do not automatically translate into a smoother transition to the labour market (Figure 2.5). This applies especially to the Southern European regions.

Nor is the converse necessarily right: low educational qualifications do not always mean a lack of access to the labour market, as opportunities often depend on regional development trajectories (Iammarino, Rodriguez-Pose & Storper, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2019). Thus, when tracking employment rates for young adults, it can be seen that several Southern regions, despite having comparatively high NEET rates, offer relatively good employment opportunities for individuals with low levels of education (Kapitsinis et al., 2022). This compares with Austria, Germany and some parts of Spain, where the employment prospects for those with low educational qualifications are also relatively high but there is a low risk of young adults becoming NEET in the first place. Furthermore, there is a correlation between the NEET rates and the employment share of highly educated young adults. When the NEET rates are lower, the employment prospects for young people with high educational attainment rise (Caroleo et al., 2020; van Vugt, Levels & van der Velden, 2024).

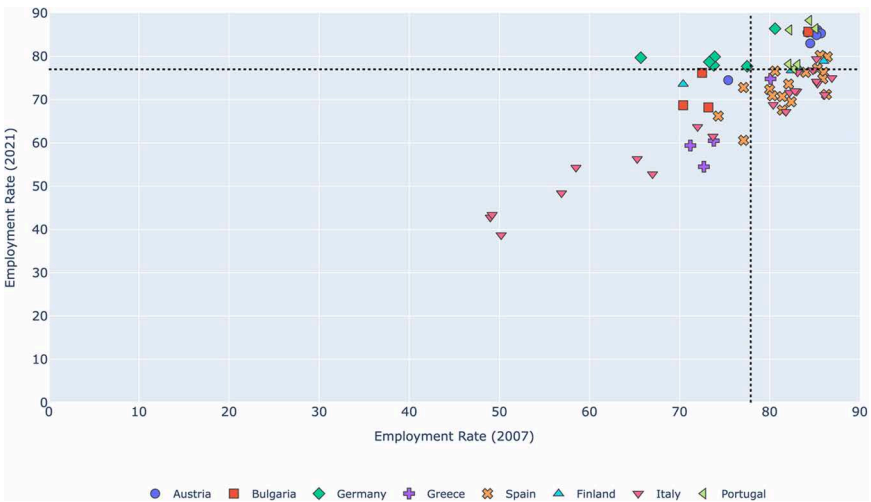


Figure 2.5 Employment rate, 20–34 years old, ISCED total, NUTS 2 regions (2007–2021).

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat (2023d).

In this section, we have critically examined the limitations of statistical measurements by relating to and contextualizing the data with broader socio-economic and spatial factors. While confirming existing gendered trends, we also explored how other intersectional dimensions – such as socio-economic background and spatial disparities – shape learning outcomes and exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in transitioning from education to the labour market. This approach highlights the multi-faceted nature of both educational experiences and their impact on young people's futures. In the final part of the chapter, we summarize the discussion and offer some concluding remarks.

Concluding remarks: Why reframe learning outcomes?

We have based this chapter on the argument that quantitative measurement of educational outcomes contributes to standardized expectations about and definitions of the quality of education. Large-scale studies like PISA notably and heavily underscore this tendency and translate the quantitative results of very specific, limited testing into evidence-based policy decisions. We have shown how research on learning outcomes and educational underachievement supports European policymaking. New policy measures are developed which are designed to counter educational poverty by raising expectations of statistically observable learning outcomes; particularly the learning outcomes of groups in vulnerable positions. Lastly, using statistical data, we have demonstrated the complexity of issues in cross-country educational comparisons and the necessity to cross-check and revise the statistical measurements using contextual information.

In this last section, we go beyond the status quo and seek to devise some entry points for reframing the prevailing concept of learning outcomes and approach education more context-sensitively and holistically.

First of all, the current, strong emphasis on learning outcomes (Harris & Clayton, 2019) has both positive and negative effects on the quality of education. The positive effect is that it points to the significance of learning and education for the future of societies and individuals. It can further help to detect the weak spots in education systems, especially through nationwide comparisons, and offer starting points for the discussion on how to improve the quality of learning and teaching (Caspersen, Smeby, & Aamodt, 2017; Ure, 2019). The concept of measurable learning outcomes in the European policy discourse is not new,

but displays the European educational landscape more profoundly and with multi-functional application than previous concepts (such as qualifications, certifications, educational standards and quality assurance), although it has not totally replaced them (Stanley, 2015). On the other hand, however, it bears certain risks and introduces biases into the discourse on the quality of education which warrant further deliberation by researchers and policymakers alike.

One risk is complex relations and factors involved in the learning process being reduced to standardized tests in formal educational settings which neglects other forms of learning, despite attempts to emphasize the importance of non-formal and informal learning. This neglect is not the only effect: it also establishes a norm against which other performances are measured and compared, such as economic indicators or policy targets. Education has turned into 'performance', an act of constant competition and comparison. However, there is no ultimate gold standard, no end point of performance towards which we should direct our efforts, be they individual or collective. Nor is there any guarantee that the current performance standards will, in any way, help to prepare today's students for future challenges and uncertainties, as these anticipatory governance practices may suggest (Kallo & Välimaa, 2025). What the students learn is how to deal with standardized ways of evaluation rather than with complex societal issues. It is the complexity and unpredictability of social life which ought to be shifted to the centre of educational aspirations.

Another risk of relying on the quantifiable learning outcomes is the unavoidable stratification of learners and its accompanying categorizations which individualize and divide a school class into well-performing students and those below the average or minimum required standards. Such external descriptors may stimulate competition but they also add another layer of inequality to those which result from the disproportional distribution of social, economic and cultural capital. Instead of perceiving learners as objects of educational interventions, it is far more productive to envision them as subjects of their own lives (Biesta, 2020).

One last bias to mention is the misleading belief that enhancing learning outcomes will automatically reduce the levels of educational poverty. This belief is biased inasmuch as it accounts only to an instrumental understanding of learning and education. If education is to be seen only as an acquisition of ready-made skills and competencies, it loses its creative and transformative power so desperately needed particularly in times of uncertainty and crisis. This became highly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic which showcased the necessity

to rethink educational approaches and their usefulness for critically assessing disruptive changes.

Against this background, we make a case for a profound reframing of learning outcomes – one which considers the breadth of real-life experiences (e.g. forced migration, informally acquired skills, communal involvement, spatiality and intersectionality) – if we are to outline educational achievement more comprehensively. This applies to non-formal and informal learning as much as to the spatial and intersectional factors involved in the formal learning process. Perhaps, to close the chapter but open our vision, learning outcomes ought not to be targeted and standardized but, rather, seen as an incomplete and unconstrained product of much wider educational aspirations.

Notes

- 1 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international large-scale study first launched in 1997 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It has a three-year cycle and tests young people (fifteen-year-olds) on their competencies in reading, mathematics and science.
- 2 The research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) is exploring the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across European regions. It is conducted between 2022 and 2025 in eight EU countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. For more information, please visit: <https://clear-horizon.eu/>. The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061155.
- 3 The education attainment levels are structured according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), starting with level 0 (Early Childhood Education) and reaching level 8 (Doctoral Education). In our comparison, the selected countries are compared according to primary (ISCED 0–2), secondary (ISCED 3–4) and tertiary (ISCED 5–8) education levels.
- 4 Limited data availability due to missing cases before 2014.
- 5 The figure can be read as follows: In the bottom-left corner, there are regions with low GDP PPS (Purchasing Power Standards) per capita and low NEET rate. The upper-left section depicts regions with low GDP PPS per capita but higher NEET rates. On the other hand, the bottom-right corner represents regions with high GDP PPS per capita and low NEET rates. Finally, the upper-right section describes regions that have high NEET rates despite having high GDP PPS per capita.

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