

Tikkanen, Jenni , Marcelo Parreira do Amaral , Tero Järvinen , and Natália Alves , ed. Constructing Learning Outcomes: Problematizing (Under)Achievement in Europe. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 24 Nov. 2025. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350446717>>.

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Accessed on: Mon Nov 24 2025 15:42:34 Eastern European Standard Time

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# Introduction

## Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: Promises and Challenges

Jenni Tikkanen, Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Tero Järvinen and  
Natália Alves

The recent turn towards learning outcomes can be counted, unequivocally, as part and parcel of the ‘revolution from above’ (Wacquant, 2010) initiated by neoliberalism to reconstruct the state’s political rationality (Bourdieu, 1994; Brenner, Peck & Theodore 2010; Crouch, 1997). The reengineering of individuals has been incurred by flexible modes of governing, not least through educational means (Brown, 2017; Morningstar, 2020). Indeed, the public administration reforms begun in the late 1970s brought about a revolutionary shift, transforming not only how social services are delivered and government spending is accounted for but, also, the very structures and practices of governance. These reforms, based on business management theories and practices, are known as New Public Management (NPM) (Fusarelli & Johnson, 2004; Tolofari, 2005). NPM spread rapidly and influenced all spheres of public policy, worldwide. Business principles, managerialism and ‘performativity’ have become almost omnipresent, ideological references in the design and application of public policies. Education was not immune to this movement. Thus, the ‘learning outcomes turn’ encompasses some of the principles on which NPM is based: efficiency, accountability, performance measurement and standardization. A critical perspective lambasts the neoliberal shift which shapes the dominant conception of learning outcomes by drawing attention to the effects of standardization. On the one hand, by focusing on specific competencies and measurable results, learning outcomes allow for comparability across different countries, institutions and programmes, increasing accountability and making it

easier to assess the effectiveness of education on a large scale. On the other hand, learning outcomes' overemphasis on quantitative assessments becomes a major concern, either because of the political manipulation and interpretation of data (Grek, 2015) or because such an emphasis neglects the complexity of education and training systems (Bohlinger, 2012; Lassnigg, 2012; Murtonen, Gruber & Lehtinen, 2017).

The close connection of the currently dominant understanding of learning outcomes to neoliberalism and NPM principles and practices raises substantial apprehensions about the ability of the learning outcomes approach to increase educational equality and promote young people's social inclusion. Rather, it can be seen to legitimize social hierarchies based on the illusion of meritocracy, thus perpetuating social inequalities (Sandel, 2020). A critical analysis of learning outcomes reveals how they may reinforce existing power dynamics, cultural hegemony and limit opportunities for groups in vulnerable positions with diverse learning needs, backgrounds and experiences (Apple, 2006). By defining learning in narrow, measurable terms, learning outcomes can make it difficult for students from marginalized or non-dominant groups to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways which align with these standardized criteria. This creates and instils a form of 'educational gatekeeping', where students who do not fit into the predefined mould are seen as less capable or successful. Simultaneously, the development of learning outcomes is often influenced by dominant cultural, social and economic ideologies. What is deemed 'valuable' knowledge is typically defined by those in positions of power, such as policymakers, industry leaders and academic elites. As a result, learning outcomes often reflect a narrow view of knowledge which serves the interests of dominant social groups, particularly those who control economic resources. This process can legitimize social inequalities by reinforcing the status quo, limiting the diversity of knowledge that is valued and promoting the idea that certain groups' ways of knowing and learning are superior (Young & Muller, 2014).

This edited volume provides a critical examination of the dominant policy and research approaches to learning outcomes and their underlying value judgements. It aims, on the one hand, to overcome the managerialist conception of learning outcomes and, on the other, the essentialist perspective based on the idea that one size fits all. In contrast, the volume advocates an understanding that learning outcomes result from manifold intersecting factors and people and, therefore, are not natural and self-evident phenomena but take on different meanings for different people. The term 'constructing' in the title is not a mere stylistic choice. It hints at the claim that learning outcomes must not be understood as a

finished version of the knowledge, competencies and skills that learners should possess at the end of a course or training cycle. The expression ‘constructing learning outcomes’ emphasizes the dynamic and contextual character which is important to consider in their formulation. Accordingly, the volume proposes and promotes a novel, context-sensitive and holistic theoretical-methodological approach which enables analysis of how learning outcomes and achievement – the latter of which is typically defined either as the difference between actual and predicted attainment of an individual or the relative performance of groups in the population – are constructed in complex processes. This approach recognizes the involvement and interactions of a multitude of actors and factors influencing the quality of learning outcomes and achievement, thus overcoming the key limitations and blind spots of current approaches. In other words, the collection suggests a multi-dimensional conception of learning outcomes to actively stimulate informed decision-making. This, then, forms the necessary basis for innovative and effective policy and research approaches that can meet the actual needs of young people, particularly in times of unpredictable changes and challenges.

## Promises and challenges of the learning outcomes approach

Policymakers argue that the main advantage of the output-focused learning outcomes approach is the clarity and precision it offers to curriculum development through which it specifies the goals and results of learning for students, educators and employers alike. Thus, they regard the approach as facilitating dialogue between education and the labour market as well as between different education and training systems: it allows for systematic analyses and comparisons of qualifications’ contents and profiles as well as for a better grasp of skills demand and supply (e.g. CEDEFOP, 2022; Harris & Clayton, 2019).

Proponents of the learning outcomes approach also present a plethora of other promises about its positive impacts and transformative qualities, ranging from various benefits to individual learners to improving the competitiveness of the EU in the global market. In its recent policy brief, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2024) argues that the approach is a central tool for modernizing education and training – in addition to its governance – and improving the quality of teaching by facilitating better design of education and training programmes and by upgrading teaching methods, learning environments and assessment practices. The policy brief

underscores the view that learning outcomes guide both teaching and learning by specifying expected knowledge, skills and overall competencies as well as detailed criteria for evaluations. This increased transparency and clarity are argued to support a more learner-centred process and give tools for active, self-directed and problem-based learning. According to CEDEFOP, the learning outcomes approach also ‘strengthens the accountability of education and training by focusing on achieved learning outcomes rather than input factors and intentions’ (CEDEFOP, 2024, p. 3).

In the EU, policymakers see learning outcomes as an important tool for achieving the goals of raising education and skill levels and of promoting social inclusion and equality of educational opportunities (European Commission, 2011). One key advantage of the learning outcomes approach is its central role in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This, it is argued, facilitates social inclusion. Advancing inclusion and equality, CEDEFOP claims, the learning outcomes approach simplifies learners’ progression through increasingly complex and diverse education and training systems, empowers learners by facilitating skills use, and broadens access to vocational education and training (VET) and increases its relevance. Moreover, learning outcomes allegedly bridge the gap between education and the labour market and prepare the learner for the world of work (CEDEFOP, 2022; 2024). Learning outcomes are, thus, seen also as policy tools for increasing individuals’ employability and facilitating their school-to-work transitions.

However, and despite the many promises made in the name of this approach, the currently dominant understanding of learning outcomes – as the observable products of the learning process within the individual, which can be assessed with quantifiable criteria and which are influenced, most importantly, by the activities of the educators – is not without serious challenges and shortcomings, mostly due to its focus on learning at the expense of education itself. It is important to note that this perspective on learning outcomes does not only have a strong foothold in the field of education policy, but has also gained popularity in teaching effectiveness research (most prominently: Hattie, 2009; 2023). While the promoters and proponents of this kind of approach to learning outcomes and educational achievement occasionally acknowledge the existence of some of the various significant critiques made against it, they still tend to downplay or even disregard the relevance of the criticisms (see, e.g. CEDEFOP, 2024; Hattie, 2019). In this climate, it is worth elaborating on some of the criticisms raised.

First, critical scholars (e.g. Erikson & Erikson, 2019; O’Connor, 2022) have argued that the current approach to learning outcomes raises serious

epistemological questions as it stems from oversimplified conceptualizations of knowledge. Not every goal of education can be expressed as a learning outcome, and not everything expressed as a learning outcome can be quantified and assessed. Such a perspective can easily lead to losing sight of the educational goals which cannot be covered by pre-defined, clearly stated and quantifiable learning outcomes (Biesta, 2009; Reindal, 2013). Loughlin, Lygo-Baker and Lindberg-Sand (2021) emphasize that the mechanistic use of learning outcomes and related terminology, when imposed top-down for accountability and quality assurance purposes, can diminish or even destroy their relevance as an educational tool for improving learning. They argue that, even though the policy intention is that the framework will, simultaneously, provide both enhancement and accountability, these two goals are mutually exclusive. Shifting the focus from the processes of learning and teaching to only their products creates an illusion of quality control which has little to do with the reality of teaching practices and student learning.

When applying an outcomes-based approach to curriculum planning, the pursued linearity can both restrict more creative approaches to teaching and learning and be mismatched with the inherent complexity of educational systems (Bone & Ross, 2021). Souto-Otero (2012) highlights that the dominating view of learning outcomes not only fails to recognize explorative and unintended learning, but also attacks liberal conceptions of education, creates a targeted culture and results in a social de-differentiation of skills. Furthermore, policymakers' eagerness to embrace 'measurable' learning outcomes poses a risk of framing and closing the space for discussion about what kinds of learning are worth supporting and what to consider as measures worth taking to improve education (Prøitz, 2015).

When learning outcomes are approached simply in terms of results of testing student achievement, they are typically used for comparison, benchmarking and identifying underachieving learners and schools displaying poor learning outcomes (Prøitz, 2010; 2015). In other words, placing a strong focus on measuring the quality of learning outcomes solely by individual- and outcome-oriented criteria has contributed to identifying groups of students who are connected to poor learning outcomes. The stratification of young people into 'achievers' and 'under-achievers' (see, e.g. Owan, Ukam & Egame, 2023), based on quantified learning outcomes alone, has created harmful divisions between students. What follows is that the issues of poor learning outcomes and the consequent educational underachievement have been viewed as problems or deficits associated with specific groups of people.

Of course, the learning outcomes approach was not born in a vacuum. As the production of data and numbers is now a key mechanism of knowing and governing the field of education (Grek, 2024), policymakers' perception of learning outcomes as objective, quantifiable and measurable serves the purpose of producing new knowledge for education governance. This reflects the effects of a broader, evidence-based, policy paradigm which has induced, through quantification, a dramatic simplification of the available perceptions of phenomena (Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017) such as educational achievement and learning outcomes. In the field of education, critical research has highlighted several relevant, intertwined dimensions and developments in this regard. The 'datafication' of educational systems, through the increased availability of data and corresponding algorithms, has introduced new means to measure, capture, describe and represent education in numbers (Jarke & Breiter, 2019). Mertala (2024) argues that datafication has transformed into 'datafixation' as it has become obsessively fixated to a harmful one-sided view whereby, while the datafication of education focuses on compelling arguments about the importance and usefulness of data, it ignores the negative consequences of reducing students, learning, teaching and education to superficial indicators. Mølsted and Pettersson (2019), in turn, emphasize the consequences of the dominance of a 'chimera of quantifications and comparisons' in education which has led to a rationality promoting 'number-intelligent' activities, changing the prevailing perceptions of education and what kind of educational actions are considered 'intelligent'. There is, for example, a widely shared belief that the use of benchmarks and scientific evidence ensures the effectiveness of improving education through 'the proper articulation of goals that enable their measurement and attainment' (Popkewitz, 2020, p. 295). Biesta (2014, p. 48) argues that, in addition to the measurement culture most prominently manifested in the large-scale international studies comparing how national education systems perform, there has been a rise of a performativity culture in education. Therein, 'means become ends in themselves so that targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself' driving 'an approach in which normative validity (where we measure what we value) is being replaced by technical validity (where we are supposed to value what is measurable)'.

The second highly problematic aspect of the learning outcomes approach is one that, while intertwined with the above-discussed 'tyranny of numbers' (Ball, 2017), has gained much less attention in the critical literature. We refer to the decontextualized and one-sided understanding of learning which ignores the relevance of different actors and spaces for learning outcomes and,

thus, turns a blind eye to the true complexity of the phenomenon. Indeed, learning and its outcomes cannot be decontextualized from the surrounding institutional arrangements and spatial determinants nor from the individual life courses within which they occur (see, e.g. Al-Tameemi et al., 2023; Cascella, 2024; Crowther, Addis & Winch, 2022; Romanowski, Alkhateeb & Chaaban, 2023). Just as learning outcomes and the consequent level of educational achievement are inseparable from individuals' life progression, they are part of trajectories and transitions constructed in a reciprocal process of political, social, economic and spatial conditions, welfare state regulations and provisions as well as individual's agentic resources, decisions and investments. In other words, learning outcomes and achievement are embedded in structures of opportunities and constraints (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). These form a complex mix of socio-economic conditions, distinct youth transition regimes and diverse practices of various actors, such as educators, policy professionals and employers (Roberts, 2018) at national, regional and local levels. Thus, they result from asymmetric discursive and power relations shaped by unequal spatial distribution of economic, political and educational resources and opportunity structures. These, in turn, further shape the definitions of young people as policy addressees, for example, as 'multi-disadvantaged youth', 'vulnerable individuals', 'low-achievers' and 'school dropouts'. We argue that the current situation exacerbates existing inequalities and prompts new divisions between the wealthier and more vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society. This is problematic for the whole population but especially so for those young people who are facing vulnerable life situations and intersectional inequalities.

## Focus and aims of the volume

The chapters in this volume discuss how increasing upward social inclusion for young Europeans requires rethinking learning outcomes as well as the theoretical-methodological frameworks used to research them. They challenge the dominant, yet ineffective, understandings of educational achievement and learning outcomes and critically discuss the social factors influencing the construction of their quality, as well as differences and gaps between groups of young people. However, the volume not only aims to present well-founded criticism, but also offers novel approaches to learning outcomes and educational achievement at conceptual, methodological and policy levels, providing new tools for conceptualizing, understanding and researching learning outcomes

and achievement. Thus, the purpose of the book is not only to problematize but also to reconceptualize the issues at hand. The new theoretical-methodological framework brought forward overcomes some of the major shortcomings and problems of the currently dominating approaches. It also has strong potential to facilitate the formulation and implementation of more effective, context-sensitive and evidence-based policies targeting unequal structures of opportunities, polarization of learning outcomes and achievement, and skills shortage in the labour market. Thus, a central aim of this volume is paving the way forward for research and policy to better identify and target the educational challenges on various governance levels in varying spatial contexts and, through that, to increase equality and accessibility of educational opportunities for young people and promote their social inclusion.

### **A novel and innovative approach to learning outcomes**

The conceptualizations and the emerging empirical results presented in this volume originate from the collaborative, ongoing European research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR). The project is funded by the European Commission<sup>1</sup> between 2022 and 2025 and carried out by thirteen partner institutions in eight EU countries from Central (Germany, Austria), northern (Finland), Southern (Greece, Italy), Southwestern (Spain, Portugal), and South-eastern (Bulgaria) Europe. Thus, the volume takes a European perspective on the topic as it examines the contexts, conditions and policies of learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement<sup>2</sup> at different geographical levels across the EU. Participating countries represent not only more than half of the EU's population but, also, diverse governmental and education systems, economic and labour market structures and socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the volume places emphasis on context-sensitivity and downshifts the attention from national to regional and local levels of analysis, offering original insights on regional and local disparities that previous studies focusing solely on the national level have been unable to grasp. The regional and local contexts in the eight countries where the study is conducted have been selected by carefully considering the available quantitative data on economic, educational and socio-structural conditions and by collecting contextual information to validate the selection (for a detailed description of the selection process and the research sites, see Zelinka et al., 2023a).

The interdisciplinary CLEAR project seeks to better understand the factors which affect the quality and the construction of learning outcomes as well as to aid the transference of new knowledge into innovative policy approaches tackling underachievement and increasing social inclusion of young people. CLEAR contributes to reducing educational inequalities by generating novel and updated empirical evidence on the construction of (under)achievement and its determinants through researching conceptual variations, policies, contexts, young people's experiences and institutional settings across the eight countries with a focus on educational policies targeting learning achievements of young people aged from eighteen to twenty-nine years. Special attention is given to groups identified in policies as being multi-disadvantaged and/or in vulnerable situations.

CLEAR's conceptualization – which is brought forth in this volume – differs from prior research on learning outcomes which has a strong focus on statistically capturing and measuring their quality. CLEAR counters this kind of construction of (under)achievement – as a solely individual and outcome-oriented criterion for understanding educational trajectories of young people – and emphasizes, instead, how structural and institutional changes intermingle with the life courses of young people and shape their individual biographies. The project understands the construction of learning outcomes to be a dynamic, relational and contingent process shaped by a variety of actors and factors. It is a process which leads to numerous definitions of educational achievement, depending on temporary variations of policy provision, labour market performance, individual dispositions, cultural and social trends and dominant discursive meanings. Learning outcomes are, thus, viewed as a complex educational, social and political phenomenon.

CLEAR is designed as a unique combination of advanced conceptual frameworks and multiple levels and techniques of analysis which facilitate the exploration of several mutually intersecting dimensions of constructing learning outcomes: individual, institutional, structural, relational and spatial. Conceptually, CLEAR is based on three major theoretical perspectives: life course (Heinz et al., 2009; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003), intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989) and spatial justice (Soja, 2009; 2013) which bridge education, sociology, social and youth policy studies and political science. CLEAR combines these theoretical perspectives to build a novel and powerful framework for a comparative, mixed-method, research design with multiple levels of analysis and innovative participatory strategies.

This framework enables conceptualization of the multi-layered research objectives: reconstructing the links between educational achievement and educational inequality, grasping regional and local complexities, giving space to young people's own voices and addressing the complex methodological issues in a dynamic and interdisciplinary manner.

The *life course* approach is based on the premise that an individual's life course is multi-dimensional and develops across various interrelated and interacting life domains (e.g. Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). It examines how individual lives are embedded in institutional and socio-historical frameworks as well as the social inequalities which emerge from these contexts (Heinz et al., 2009). The contexts are shaped by national, regional and local structures of opportunities and constraints, creating a complex mix of socio-economic conditions (Cefalo, Scandurra & Kazepov, 2020; Scandurra, Cefalo & Kazepov, 2020), institutional policies forming distinct youth transition regimes (Walther, 2017) and diverse practices of actors, including educators, policy professionals, employers and individuals (Roberts, 2018). Thus, the approach holds that the trajectories and transitions within an individual's life course are constructed through the interplay of political, social, economic and spatial conditions, welfare state regulations and provisions, and biographical decisions and investments of individuals (Parreira do Amaral, Steiner-Khamsi & Thompson, 2019; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022). The life course approach offers a logical framework to explore individual and subjective dimensions in the construction of learning outcomes and (under)achievement in a lifelong learning perspective. It supports examination of the experiences, expectations, visions and perceptions of young Europeans and their ability to create subjective meanings and continuity along the different phases of their life courses, with consideration of their diverse socio-economic and spatial contexts. CLEAR also applies the theoretical instruments of life course research to policy analysis; specifically, to understand how various policies interact with the individual life courses of young people and to localize the points of possible change. The project applies the paradigmatic principles of the life course perspective, particularly the role of individual agency, recognizing that young people do not accept their social and historical circumstances passively. Instead, they actively construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003).

*Intersectionality* emphasizes the dynamic interplay of multiple social positions, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, age and sexual orientation, in shaping individuals' self-conceptions and producing social inequalities (Cho,

Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Järvinen & Silvennoinen, 2024). This perspective, which recognizes that inequalities are multi-dimensional, analyses how social and cultural categories intertwine to create unique forms of discrimination. Intersectionality supports more holistic assessment of educational inequalities, sharpens the view on educational policies targeting underachievement and helps to devise intersectional solutions to intersectional problems. Within CLEAR, the intersectional approach helps to connect different analytical perspectives to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of the targeted phenomena. It also enables a context-sensitive approach based on the idea that identity categories are always contextually constrained and facilitated by intersectional identity locations (Wilkins, 2014). With respect to the policies studied, a critical intersectional method informs the research in an extensive and inclusive manner, revealing that even well-intentioned policies may fall short if they assume that all inequalities share the same ontological history and internal logic and, thus, ignore the historical and contextual realities of the different forms of inequality (Smooth, 2013). It further strengthens the project's analytical scope by emphasizing that any policy dealing with (under)achievement is embedded, to varying degrees, in regimes of class, gender, ethnic and other inequalities (Walby, 2009). To this end, CLEAR focuses on variable configurations of socio-economic, ethnic and gender divides among young people in the EU member states and regions (Parreira do Amaral, Kovacheva & Rambla, 2019).

Finally, the *spatial justice* approach, which is crucial when conducting in-depth comparative analyses in various spatial contexts, emphasizes the significance of space as an active force shaping human life and draws attention to the interaction of space and power (Soja, 2009; 2013; Williams, 2013). This perspective on spatiality reveals that spaces are influenced by economic, political and power interests, and, thus, cannot be seen as neutral or impartial entities. Instead, they are embedded in the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and structures which favour certain actions and decisions over others (Parreira do Amaral & Jornitz, 2019). In education, spatial injustice refers to the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities among regions, cities, neighbourhoods and schools, divided by factors such as rural-urban differences and class and minority concentrations. These divisions are influenced, for instance, by housing and labour markets, and educational policies concerning zoning and school choice (e.g. Beach et al., 2018; Benasso et al., 2022). A lack of spatial justice affects learning outcomes through disparities in access to early childhood education and care, adult and higher education, urban and school segregation, as well as the links between VET and innovation systems across

different regions and localities. Thus, as education is embedded in the inter-relations that form the opportunity structures in a given place, CLEAR adopts the critical perspective of spatial justice to unveil how spaces interact with the life courses of young people, how the spatial organization of society affects educational policymaking, and how unjust spatial dispersion of population creates conditions which further stigmatize and marginalize disadvantaged groups. In short, spatial justice helps to conceptualize learning outcomes and (under)achievement as phenomena conditioned by spatial factors.

In addition to the novel conceptual framework, the originality of the project lies in three further aspects. First, as mentioned above, attention is 'downshifted' from the national to the regional and local levels of policy analysis. Although national levels have been instrumental in identifying institutional typologies of VET and adult learning and education, such studies have been unable to grasp the highly influential regional and local disparities. Second, the research looks at the construction of intersectional inequalities in education and training. There are complex interconnections between the experiences of female and male youths who have gone through very uneven processes of (early) school leaving, often reproducing disadvantages related to families with a low socio-economic status or with direct experience of migration or ethnic constraints. In this regard, CLEAR problematizes the discursive and policy construction of youths as vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged according to their position, status, educational achievements or family background. Third, CLEAR invests in activating young people's participation in the design and implementation of policy solutions. The project adopts an innovative, transversal, participatory approach (for a more detailed discussion on the role of participation in the CLEAR project, see Chapter 7 in this volume), which creates opportunities for direct and active involvement of young people, policymakers, experts and policy practitioners. By creating favourable conditions for discussion and the sharing of experiences and research results among these stakeholders, CLEAR aims to enable targeted policy solutions which are fine-tuned to the actual needs of young people; thus, actively stimulating informed decision-making to support policy. The participatory approach also enhances the project's mixed-method design as it provides direct insights and experience-based knowledge from the stakeholders and, therefore, combines multiple, interdisciplinary and inter-group perspectives. Most importantly, facilitating the exchange between experts and young people promotes awareness of problems and capacity-building for addressing them. This, in turn, strengthens young people's positions in the negotiation, design and implementation of measures to tackle social

vulnerabilities and create solutions related to poor learning outcomes and the multiple factors involved in their construction.

While the volume focuses on the European context, it is relevant also to audiences beyond Europe: improving the quality of young people's educational achievement and learning outcomes is of global interest. This is showcased, for instance, by the importance the EU and the OECD place on these topics in relation to pressing global issues of educational equality and justice, skills development of young people and the sustainability and competitiveness of societies. Moreover, the novel and innovative theoretical-methodological framework proposed in this volume is not applicable only to European societies and regions, nor is it limited to researching only learning outcomes and achievement. We suggest it is of interest and value to scholars doing research on complex, multi-dimensional, social phenomena across the world. In addition to researchers, the issues dealt with here are of utmost importance to other audiences; such as policymakers aiming to promote the equality of educational opportunities, bridge the gaps between skills supply and demand and ensure the sustainability of societies by tackling poor learning outcomes and educational underachievement. Furthermore, the range of stakeholders, experts and administrators of education interested in assessing the effects and limits of organizational and pedagogical arrangements will find the volume useful.

### **Sources of empirical evidence**

The data produced in the CLEAR project,<sup>3</sup> on which most of the chapters of this volume draw, include, firstly, two sets of quantitative data. For one set, the primary sources are from Eurostat: Labour Force Survey (LFS), European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and National and Regional Accounts. The data spans the period 2005 to 2021 and its collection focused on young people aged between fifteen and thirty-four in the eight CLEAR countries. It utilized the EU's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification with a focus on NUTS 0 (national) and NUTS 2 (regional) levels. This dataset includes fifty-one indicators grouped into six major dimensions: education, labour market, economic context, demographic context, material conditions and institutional setting (Kazepov et al., 2023). The second quantitative data set consists of the results of an expert survey (N=494) carried out in the CLEAR countries in late 2023 and early 2024. The survey forecasted future scenarios of educational disadvantage, quality of learning outcomes and (under)achievement as well as assessed the multi-level

governance and coordination of different policy strands in defining and dealing with regional and national (under)achievement. The respondents include national and regional level experts from the fields of education and training, adult learning, labour market and youth work representing the public sector, academia and research, labour market and civil society (Barberis et al., 2024).

A further source of data includes a combination of grey literature and expert interviews. These sources enable the mapping out of processes of skills formation and skills utilization and analysing how the levels of government connect with skills-equilibria at national and regional levels in the eight countries. The grey literature includes documents which define learning outcomes at ISCED 2–6 levels with a focus on health, hospitality and IT sectors of vocational and higher education as well as documents that convey definitions of learning outcomes at the regional and local levels. The semi-structured expert interviews (N=105), which complement the written documentation with evidence of everyday practices, were conducted in the respective countries with regional and local level education and employment policy professionals in the three sectors in early 2024. The interviews focused on the experts' views on challenges entailed in the institutional dimensions of young people's life courses, intersectional inequalities faced by students and spatial justice in the coordination of the educational programmes (Rambla et al., 2024).

Another qualitative data set of the CLEAR project consists of narrative biographical interviews with young adults (aged from eighteen to thirty years; N=168) in thriving and declining regions in the CLEAR countries in the spring of 2024. The gender-balanced sample consists of young people currently or previously in multi-disadvantaged or vulnerable life situations. The interviews focused on young adults' experiences of learning, schooling and education along their life courses, their current life situation and future views as well as experiences of regional (lack of) educational, labour market and life course opportunities (Järvinen et al., 2024).

The chapters draw also on a state-of-the-art review on the research and policy debates on learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement, both at national and international levels, looking at the prevailing understandings of both concepts and demonstrating the necessity to research the interplay of factors involved in their construction (Zelinka et al., 2023b). Lastly, the data sets are complemented by the implementation of the Transversal Participatory Approach to provide direct insights and experience-based knowledge from young people and relevant experts.<sup>4</sup>

## Organization of the volume

The volume is structured into three parts which, together, provide a multi-dimensional and novel conception of the construction of learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement. In doing so, it forms a critical basis for future research and effective policymaking. Following this introduction, Part I, *Problematizing Learning Outcomes*, lays the foundation for the volume's conceptual, methodological and policy reflections and conclusions. It challenges the prevailing decontextualized and one-sided approach to learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement and questions the promises of such an approach for improving the quality and effectiveness of education. The chapters illustrate how the dominant approach to learning outcomes ignores the relevance of various actors and spaces in the construction of educational (under)achievement; leads to a reductionist and instrumental vision of education, turning it into constant competition and comparison; and creates stark divisions between young people. Part I problematizes how poor learning outcomes and underachievement, as deficits, are associated with specific groups of people and critically examines the discursive, political and social factors influencing the construction of their quality.

Chapter 1 *Social Construction of Performance and Ability in Policy and Practice: Comparing German Saxony-Anhalt and Canadian British Columbia* by Tanja Sturm examines how achievement and achievement gaps are constructed in classroom practices and the documents which frame schooling. She also looks at how the relation between the everyday interaction among students and teachers, as well as the formal schooling regulations, is handled in two societies which vary widely on the (in)equity of associated learning outcomes. Through this examination, she shows how socially constructed achievement gaps are often uncritically accepted by different actors involved in the construction of learning outcomes as a social necessity and as 'truth'.

In Chapter 2, *Countering Educational Poverty by Raising Learning Outcomes of Young People*, Jozef Zelinka, Nikoletta Jablonczay, Georgios K. Zarifis and Tero Järvinen discuss how attempts to raise learning outcomes and prevent educational inequality and underachievement by European policymakers have mostly occurred through evidence-based policies utilizing quantitative data and results from large-scale comparative surveys. In the chapter, the authors argue that such perspective on learning outcomes misses the wider context and relations in which the process of learning unfolds. They illustrate why a more

context-sensitive and comprehensive approach to learning and educational achievement is needed.

Part II of the volume is titled *Reviewing and Revisiting Research and Policy on Learning Outcomes*. It deepens and elaborates the arguments presented in the first part of the book by reviewing the state of international research on learning outcomes. It revisits and analyses both relevant European policies addressing learning outcomes and the current situation of youth learning outcomes in Europe, making a critical assessment of the production of the widely used data and indicators. Part II concludes with an illustrative discussion on how using participatory research methods can, in addition to facilitating the production of context-sensitive knowledge on the construction processes of learning outcomes, empower young people and support their agency in their life courses. This is of particular importance for youth in vulnerable and multi-disadvantaged life situations.

In Chapter 3, *A European Assessment of Territorial Divides in Underachievement*, Ruggero Cefalo, Rosario Scandurra and Alexandra Ioannidou address data from OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and the EU Labour Force Survey to propose a spatial perspective on learning outcomes and underachievement. Their comparative analyses of territorial divides in learning outcomes show how educational underachievement is characterized by spatial dimensions and how regional opportunity structures influence individual courses of action producing spatial variation in learning outcomes.

In Chapter 4, *A Synthesis Review of Education Research on Learning Outcomes*, Jozef Zelinka and colleagues provide a synthesis of the state of international education research on learning outcomes, with a focus on the eight EU countries involved in the CLEAR project. The chapter carries out a synthesis review on how the education research has been informed about and tackled the issue of learning outcomes in relation to young people, policymakers, educational practitioners and other relevant stakeholders.

Xavier Rambla, Paula Guimarães and Valeria Pandolfini, in Chapter 5, *A Comparative Analysis of Validation of Prior Learning in Europe*, compare how Austria, Germany, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Spain have elaborated their approach to learning outcomes in official EU documents, and how Italy, Portugal and Spain have designed schemes of prior learning validation in the last decade.

In Chapter 6, *A Review of European Policies on Socio-Cultural Diversity in Education*, Georgios K. Zarifis, Sebastiano Benasso and Darena Hristozova review European policies, which contribute to shaping young people's learning

outcomes. The authors pay particular attention to how policies take socio-cultural diversity into account. They conclude that increasing diversity in the process of producing learning outcomes increases understanding about diverse modes of learning and provides supportive role models for underrepresented and underprivileged groups.

Chapter 7, *Participatory Methods Fostering Young People's Empowerment in Education* by Sebastiano Benasso, Siyka Kovacheva and Luca Raffini, focuses on the integration of participatory methods in education research. Drawing from literature, the chapter discusses the implications of participation as a subversion of routine research practices which are questioned in terms of power balances, research designs and definitions. The authors illustrate how the application of participatory methods may shed light on the processes of construction of the learning outcomes in different social contexts.

In Part III, *Rethinking Learning Outcomes and Educational Achievement*, the three concluding chapters draw on the work communicated in the previous chapters to offer novel approaches to rethinking learning outcomes and educational achievement at conceptual, methodological and policy levels. This is to acknowledge and account for the true complexity of the phenomena. Thus, this part sketches out new tools for conceptualizing, understanding and researching learning outcomes and achievement and discusses the ways in which related policies could promote inclusiveness of education.

In Chapter 8, *Rethinking Educational Achievement, Expanding Learning Outcomes*, Tiago Neves, Jozef Zelinka, Gil Nata and Natália Alves examine the rationales, implementation processes and functions of the dominant, narrow view of educational achievement. This view, in scholarly literature, is often equated with academic achievement; thus, limiting educational matters to what is academically relevant. The authors not only propose an expansion of the prevailing understanding of educational achievement to encompass neglected dimensions, but also discuss the procedural, functional and political implications of the proposal.

Chapter 9, *Researching Educational (Under)Achievement and Learning Outcomes* by Isabella Quadrelli, Jenni Tikkanen, Christina Cavallo and Luca Raffini, explores new directions in methodological practice and reflection in socio-educational research of learning outcomes and educational achievement. The authors draw on the CLEAR project in proposing a novel theoretical-methodological framework for studying learning outcomes and educational achievement. This framework brings together the theoretical perspectives, concepts and methodological tools of life course research, intersectionality

and spatial justice and complements them with key elements of participatory research methods.

In Chapter 10, *A Spatial Perspective on Promoting Inclusiveness Through Learning Outcomes in Europe*, Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Jozef Zelinka, Siyka Kovacheva and Xavier Rambla argue that, while European efforts to tackle risks of social exclusion and improve the situation of younger generations, especially those in vulnerable positions, have been substantial in terms of both money invested and initiatives and programmes put forth, the results of these policies have, generally, been rather modest. Adopting a spatial justice lens, the authors discuss how policies frame the issue of achievement and learning outcomes to reach their goals and discuss initial results from the ongoing empirical research conducted in CLEAR.

Lastly, a postscript by the editors of the volume ties the contributions together, reflects on their significance and provides an outlook on the next steps.

## Notes

- 1 The CLEAR project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061155. The CLEAR partner institutions are: University of Münster and Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning and European Research Services GmbH, Germany; Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain; University of Turku, Finland; University of Vienna, Austria; University of Lisbon and University of Porto, Portugal; University of Genoa, University of Urbino and Codici Cooperativa Sociale, Italy; University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria; and University of Thessaloniki, Greece. The project is coordinated by Marcelo Parreira do Amaral at the University of Münster, Germany. For more information see: [www.clear-horizon.eu](http://www.clear-horizon.eu).
- 2 The project uses the term '(under)achievement' in brackets, first, to highlight its selective character and the fact that what counts as academic (under)achievement in one country or region may not apply the same in other contexts. Second, the goal is to look beyond the simplistic logic of categorizing students into achievers, over-achievers and low-achievers, and, instead, problematize the very construction of the term, its use in policymaking and in various learning environments and skills ecosystems (see entry '(Under)Achievement' in the CLEAR Glossary, online at <https://clear-horizon.eu/glossary/>).
- 3 At the time of writing the chapters, the empirical data from the project were preliminary but, nevertheless, solid and convincing enough to support and justify

the need to reconceptualize learning outcomes and educational achievement – the key aim of the volume – as will be shown throughout this book.

- 4 One of the epistemological principles on which the project is based, is to consider the participants not as objects but as subjects of research. The operationalization of this principle consists of the use of the TPA. Social actors are involved in CLEAR as participants to overcome the ‘routine’ narrowness of their role as ‘information carriers’ and to valorize their knowledge, skills and experiences according to the specificity of their positions in the field of education. The general idea is that social actors not only accumulate opinions and build relationships in social fields, but also actively contribute to the production of a society which, consequently, cannot be analysed solely on the basis of the top-down approach of social theory. In the CLEAR Consortium, the University of Genoa is responsible for the design and implementation of the TPA (see <https://clear-horizon.eu/consortium/unige/>; see also entry ‘Transversal Participatory Approach’ in the CLEAR Glossary, online at: <https://clear-horizon.eu/glossary/>).

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